Shinobu Suicide

001

There may be some commendable people out there who are so plagued with curiosity regarding how Araragi Koyomi is doing right now. But, in order to speak of now, I first have to look back on the spring of last year, the spring of two years ago, and even the "heyday"[1] of six hundred years ago. I even wanted to look back to the Indian summer of a thousand years ago—though I am aware that an Indian summer isn't actually spring.[2] It would be a big deal if suddenly looking that far back made my head twist off, even in spite of my half-baked vampire constitution.

So, I'll take the middle ground and first talk about the spring of five years ago.

But was it the middle ground that I took, or darkness?[3]

Back then, when I was a middle school third-year student, I aimed beyond my position for the private university-focused school known as Naoetsu High School, and I took their entrance exams with an excitement that could only be described as me having gotten carried away. And I would pay for it dearly—at that school, where the local elites would freely assemble, I had become an unbearably run-down and crumbling dropout, out-of-shape in both mind and body, experiencing a serious injury that made me feel as though I was on the verge of death.

I had completely been immersed in death, as though I was immersed in narcissism.

It was to the point that I was given the great honor of being the most delinquent student in the history of Naoetsu High—though the truth was that I was just a lazy, frivolous, school-hating student that constantly arrived late and left early. I wasn't exactly that great of an

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[1] 我が世の春 *wa ga yo no haru* "heyday", literally "the spring of my world".
[2] 小春日和 *koharubiyori* "Indian summer", literally "small spring weather". Indian summer refers to the period of unseasonal warm weather in autumn. While English considers this a mini-summer, Japanese considers this a mini-spring.
[3] 間 *aida* "between" (in the context of 間を取る *aida o toru* "take the middle ground"), 闇 *yami* "darkness".

outlaw, but alas, relative evaluations could be pretty tough. If everyone around me was an honors student, then someone like me would end up as a legendary poor student.

Depending on the umpire, it would be a down-and-away strike.[4]

I was a youngster that fit the mold.

And, to that life of mine, a huge turning point came during the spring break between my second and third year of high school, nicknamed "the hellish spring break"—I was attacked by a vampire.

Rather than a turning point in my life, it was more like a downturn. Or even corruption.[5]

In any case, it was some kind of fall.

The punch line of my life.[6]

It was astonishing to learn that I could fall even further than that—but after that spring break, various things had happened and various things had been lost, and at the very end, I'd even fallen, not metaphorically but literally, into hell, so I couldn't just think of it as my luck bottoming out.

The future will always outsmart me.

It'll take me by surprise and aim right for the heart.

Speaking of relative evaluations, because I came to experience that sort of hell, I'd switched to the overblown, or rather, the underblown position that I hadn't fallen that far at all. And thus, from someone who was anxious about graduating even before the thought of entering university, I'd performed a class change into a proper examinee student—from an outsider's perspective, I may have just seemed like some dependent guy that was suddenly filled with motivation after getting a girlfriend after Golden Week and was desperate to enter the same university as her, but I would like it if you didn't come to such malicious conclusions.

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[4] アウトロー *autoroo* means "outlaw", but it can also mean "out low" as in "down-and-away" in baseball.

[5] 転機 *tenki* "turning point", 転落 *tenraku* "plunge, dive" (translated as "downturn"). 堕落 *daraku* "corruption".

[6] 落 *ochi* "fall", オチ *ochi* "punch line".

It was rather complicated.

Having come this far, I couldn't exactly say that I'd like for you to read all the volumes that have been published, but recently, it seems the culture of audiobooks has been spreading, so you may wish to use those as a reference for the details. But as a result, as a high school third-year, I did not learn from my experience and once again aimed beyond my position, setting my course for a national university where the local elites assembled, Manase University.

Like setting sail upon stormy seas.

Just how much did I like to mingle with the elites? Just what kind of complex was I carrying? The darkness in my heart ran much too deep.

However, after graduating, I came to realize that that elite, university-focused high school was not an assembly of naive elites and pure honors students like I'd assumed—it was something I couldn't see without looking in from the outside. To use conventional language without trying to be original, the elites and the honors students had troubles that I didn't have, and they had struggles with human relationships that I couldn't have had. As a "delinquent student", the fact that I had been lazily skipping out on more than just my classes something I would regret for the rest of my life—and though I said "I didn't learn from my experience", that mistake from my high school years was something I would absolutely never make again in university.

Learn from experience.

Drill it in.[7]

It's not repeating those mistakes. It's not continuing them.

It's starting over.

The class representative among class representatives that rehabilitated me was no longer around anymore, but that was precisely the reason why I needed to enjoy a respectable and righteous campus life—though I thought that, though I set my heart on that, all sorts of incidents occurred during my first year of university, making me think that it wasn't much different from my dreadful high school life. But,

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[7] 懲りる *koriru* "to learn from experience", 懲らしめる *korashimeru* "to discipline".

through my skill as a person of experience, I'd like to say that I was able to deftly pull through those incidents one way or another, but anyway, that's all for the preface.

That's all for the headrest.[8]

From now on, it's the futon, but not one made of feathers.

In April of the following year, leading up to Araragi Koyomi's twentieth birthday, I'd ceremoniously advanced to my second year of university without dropping out or repeating a year, but due to a certain reason, I'd been forced to depart from the lodgings in which I was living alone and instead return to the home of my dear parents.

Everyone, I'm home!

Not only that, but for quite a long time, I hadn't been attending university—but it was certainly not the case that my dreadful habit of playing hooky had been revived.

In a way, you could say it was being a shut-in.

You know, that thing called remote learning.

Unlike my life, which I've been managing to live out in secret, there was probably no reason to reflect on this particular situation in ostentatious detail. Assuming there was no one stranded on some deserted island somewhere, then without exaggeration, it was something that affected everyone in the whole world—the novel coronavirus pandemic.

All in-person classes at university were suspended, and there was no sign of them resuming—I'd clung to my desk while vomiting blood, sacrificed my sleep, and crammed a ton of useless knowledge into my brain, all for the sake of acquiring that "GO TO UNIVERSITY" ticket, and yet it had almost entirely been rendered invalid.

Like someone who'd failed in the stock market.

What was the point in investing all that I had?

For what purpose had I studied so hard, even getting my girlfriend and the class representative involved? I couldn't keep myself from

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[8] 枕 *makura*, literally "pillow". It's a term in *rakugo* referring to the lead-in before the actual story, but it gets interpreted literally in the next line.

bemoaning this—of course, I had unmistakably been in a blessed position, though it was hard for me to say that so openly, but my lack of insight had led me to believe that I'd been under a curse cast upon me by the elites that I had unfairly scorned.

I was cursed.

But no, I was actually blessed.

Perhaps I should say that I was blessed *because* of the curse—through the aforementioned "hellish spring break", my constitution had become something like a half-vampire's, and as a result, I couldn't even catch the common cold.

For me, a healthy body was constantly maintained.

By force.

As an immortal monster who wouldn't die from having his brains blown out or his heart gouged out, it was highly unlikely I'd lose my life to the novel or even the conventional coronavirus—and on the off chance that something did happen, it was possible for me to revive simply by having Shinobu suck my blood.

However, I couldn't help but feel guilty, like I was cheating by using that supernatural safety valve... Meniko had said that, after hearing that this pandemic posed less of a risk to youngsters, she started feeling survivor's guilt just by being young. That the term "youngster" had begun to sound like an insult.

Hamukai Meniko.

It had been a while since I'd met her, too. Even though she was one of the few friends I'd made at university.

Meniko was currently isolating at her lodgings—apparently she'd planned on throwing a surprise party for my birthday, but since she was naturally unable to do that, I'd received her present in the mail the other day.

It was a weird kind of dictionary.

If I'd received it in person, she would have gotten a great reaction out of me.

This disease sure was terrifying, to be able to spoil even surprises—in order to not spread the disease, I'd also shut myself in my lodgings and abstained from traveling, with no plans on returning to my parents' home, but it ended up being a "family affair", the kind that you'd see in any family.

Not a love affair. A family affair.[9]

I'd appreciate it if you would hear me out.

There was no reason to hide it anymore, and I didn't really want to hide it anymore, so I'll say this from the outset. Both of my parents were police officers, essential workers that needed to go to work for the sake of maintaining public order, especially in times like these—they couldn't just work as police officers online.

Cyber police was a different department.

However, a police station was necessarily crowded to the point that a cluster outbreak could occur at any time, so it was not an easy decision for them, but they took the initiative to take up residence at their place of work, like partial self-isolation—as their son, I was shocked at how far they would go for their work, but I was almost twenty years old, and I had graduated from my rebellious phase when I graduated from high school.

I was already used to my parents' busy periods.

I even felt that they were deserving of respect.

Or rather, I couldn't refuse my parents' request of, "Come back home and take care of your sisters"—in fact, I had also been worried about leaving my sisters, high school second-year Araragi Karen and high school first-year Araragi Tsukihi, on their own at home.

There was something scary about it.

Something scary, in an abstract way.

Though they may have disbanded when Karen advanced to high school last year, it would be ill-advised to leave the Tsuganoki 2nd Fire Sisters unsupervised for a long period of time, speaking as an older

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[9] 事情 *jijou* "circumstances", 情事 *jouji* "love affair".

brother who had taken the initiative to live in extreme foolishness—especially in such a stressful state of the world.

Therefore, I would act as guardian on their behalf.

I was capable of doing that much. As an essential brother.

Originally, I'd planned on moving into my lodgings at the start of my second year in university, and I'd gotten ahead of myself and left home during my first year, instead. Returning home at the start of my second year gave me an immense "fleeing the capital" sort of feeling, so what would I do if I couldn't even be a babysitter for my sisters?

Fortunately, elementary, middle, and high schools reopened earlier than universities, so my sisters, of a generation younger than mine, were using their smartphones (that our parents had bought for them due to the pandemic) to adapt reasonably well to the situation.

Reasonably, or rather, skilfully.

I could even say, inventively.[10]

Though classes had resumed, it was still inevitable that choir competitions, cultural festivals, sports festivals, and field trips were suspended, postponed, or reduced in scale, which was a big deal—especially for Tsukihi.

"I may not be a restaurant employee, but I'm still smiling beneath my mask!"

said Tsukihi, in high spirits.

I could tell just from her eyes that she was all smiles.

She was Tsukihi the Quokka.

I'd already known that they were the type of sisters that grew even livelier the more cornered they were, so it was not particularly unexpected, and if anything, it was completely within my expectations. During disasters like these, there were always people that increased their presence and took the lead, and these former Fire Sisters reached out to their middle school classmates over social media to hold plenty of online events.

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[10] 巧み *takumi* "skillful", 匠 *takumi* "workman, artisan".

I'd been worried that this would be a depressing start to their high school life, but at this rate, it wouldn't be long before Karen and Tsukihi reunited as the Fire Sisters in Tsuganoki Private High School.

How energetic of them.

It almost made me doubt if they were really my sisters.

Perhaps more dreadful than an *enfant terrible*, who could be reproached for their youth, was the current social landscape—but there was no point in envying those that were younger. If anything, I suppose I could view things positively, as I would've never had the opportunity to stand in the kitchen for the sake of my sisters. It didn't make up for those hostile days where we would get into fist fights on sight, but I was earning experience points that would be hard to obtain otherwise. I could also say that I was feeling less depressed than I'd been in the apartment that made up my lodgings.

Speaking of lodgings... There was Oikura Sodachi.

Our very own Euler.

In the first place, it was out of concern for that childhood friend that I'd moved up my plans to leave my parents' home in order to become her neighbor (thinking about it now, that was the only reason I'd started living alone—if it weren't for that, I might have spent the rest of my life at my parents' home), but unlike Meniko, who was always-online and TeleHodai-connected[11] with notifications constantly appearing on her smartphone from her friends and boyfriend, and unlike Senjougahara Hitagi, who was isolating in a dormitory and thus had no choice but to live communally, Oikura was "living alone" in the truest sense, with no parents' home to return to. Was she able to stay in her right mind in this situation?

It was concerning.

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[11] テレホーダイ TeleHodai is a service that offers (or offered) reduced prices for calls during off-peak hours. The name derives from テレホン *terehon* "telephone" and 放題 *houdai* "doing as much as one pleases". In the Japanese, Koyomi uses TeleHodai as an adjective to describe Meniko, so it's less about the actual usage of the service and more about the impression that the name gives off.

I wanted to show my concern.[12]

Well, she hadn't exactly been in her right mind even before all this... But I felt guilty about having returned to my parents' home and having left Oikura on her own.

Not to mention, she wasn't exactly good with remote classes.

Or rather, she was bad at using a computer or her smartphone camera... I could imagine that having a pathological aversion to being photographed made it hard to live in this world of surveillance, but the state of the world had become such that it would be unbearable.

How unblessed could she be?

It was times like these when people who weren't compatible with remote conferences were reproached for being relics of a bygone era, but Oikura had been persecuted for the majority of her life, not just times like these. So she simply couldn't put up with even the indirect gaze of a "camera lens"... It wasn't just limited to pandemics, but weak people seemed especially weak during these times.

If there were those that found it hard to breathe because they had to wear masks all the time, there were also those that found it easier to breathe because they could avoid others' gazes and maintain anonymity thanks to wearing masks. People were truly diverse.

It was ironic that an identical form of harm made that diversity so much more distinct—but was it making it distinct, or making it fluctuate?[13]

Even if it weren't for that, Oikura was prone to being stuck in her own head, so one day, as her loyal childhood friend, I summoned up the courage to invite her to my home, but I was curtly refused.

"What's wrong? We're basically family, so until in-person classes resume, why not stay at the Araragi home, just like old times? I'll come up with a good explanation for Hitagi."

"Die."

She hung up on me with a slam.

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[12] 心配 ***shinpai*** "concern" shares ***kanji*** with 心を配りる ***kokoro o kubaru*** "to pay attention, to show concern".

[13] 浮き彫りになる ***ukibori ni naru*** "to make distinct", 浮き沈み ***ukishizumi*** "ups and downs".

How do you even hang up on a cell phone with a slam?

That's the only line you're going to get to say this time around, but are you okay with that? At least she seemed fine... That was all that mattered.

Later, when I checked with Hitagi, apparently Oikura was actually becoming healthier in both mind and body, even in the midst of this pandemic, because her stalker-like neighbor had moved away.

Huh, so she'd had a stalker-like neighbor?

Was it the neighbor on the other side? But I thought Oikura's apartment was situated at the end of the building... Well, whatever. If Oikura was even a little happy, it made me the happiest in the world.

Thank you for bringing me happiness.

Right, right, speaking of a stalker-like person—there was Kanbaru Suruga.

Though I wanted to keep that part of her in check.

Flawed as it was, I'd managed to enjoy at least one year of my campus life before the pandemic started, but for Kanbaru Suruga's generation, the generation one year younger than mine, they weren't even able to spend a day at university, much less a year... In front of Kanbaru and Higasa-chan, my lamentations meant nothing.

Though I understood the suffering they felt during entrance exams, there was no way for me to know how they truly felt.

It was meaningless to compare problems like this, and to a shrewd individual, it might even seem as though I was trying to find people with worse problems and convince myself, "At least I'm better off." And that made me feel even more sorry... With Kanbaru and Higasa-chan, and with the members of the girls' basketball team that I'd forged bonds with only after graduating, I'd seen up close how they struggled through entrance exams and secured tickets to their schools of choice, so I couldn't help but feel pity for those girls' current situations.

It would be ruined even for the honors students of these top schools.

It was outrageous.

And on top of that, I couldn't go and visit her in encouragement, nor could I invite her over for a meal. What was going to happen to the inter-high competitions this year… As someone who'd never been a part of a sports club, I had no way of knowing how athletes felt, but things were probably going to change completely for high school sports and their club activities.

They were even saying that the promising new vaccine shouldn't be given to minors just yet—ah, well, it hadn't been for the sake of encouraging her, but after I'd returned to my parents' home, I had met Kanbaru once.

Of course, while practicing social distancing… I'd visited her house to help clean up.

She had already been the "superstar incapable of cleaning up", but now that she was staying home round-the-clock, her room wasn't just a simple mess. Before worrying about virus contamination, the contamination of her home was much more serious. Was she trying to cause global warming by herself? Seriously… She might even catch some other disease.

However, it was true that living together with her grandparents made it a high-risk setting, so her room needed to be made into as comfortable an environment as possible—you could say that a messy room was comfortable in its own way, but now that she'd graduated from high school and become a university student (even if it was in name only), Kanbaru had realized that she couldn't live messily forever, deciding to get a fresh start and clean up her room. And, after an hour, she gave up and came crying to me for help.

What happened to your sporty attitude?

Really, I never expected that the periodic cleaning-up of Kanbaru's room, which I'd started because I couldn't just leave it alone, would last this long and even become a lifesaving act. And if I were to say "Well, considering the times, please clean your room by yourself," it would be being far too distant for my junior—we couldn't shake hands or hug or

high-five after the cleanup, but the fact that I was able to use it as an excuse to check up on Kanbaru was enough of a reward.

For a girl so active she'd run ten kilometers every morning and evening, it must be hard for her to be cooped up in her home, unable to move around even if she wanted to. But she still acted strong for my sake—even if she was still incapable of cleaning her own room, it did mean that she wouldn't remain a high school student forever.

Though she hadn't even spent a day at university.

And, even if I was used to it from my high school days, for people with lots of friends like Kanbaru and Higasa-chan, this environment in which they "couldn't make any new friends" would surely affect them greatly... Though I could only imagine how painful it felt.

Under circumstances like these, "being the same as always" was equal to "pushing yourself too hard".

And, while we were on the topic of friends, I was reminded of my friend, Hachikuji Mayoi—normally, it would be much too disrespectful to simply refer to her as my friend, as she had now become the god of this town, but as for what she was doing now, she was taking udon noodles and praying to Amabie-sama.[14]

Like Koto-chan from Kotoden.[15]

Well, though she may be a god, Hachikuji was the god of taking walks and the god of lost children, so she was weak to the idea of staying at home... In terms of personality, she was basically as active as Kanbaru, the complete opposite of shut-ins. Still, it may be due to her divine favor that this pandemic hadn't spread quite so much in my hometown. She was protecting the act of taking walks for the sake of good health.

She became a god at quite the difficult time, too.

I couldn't help but feel responsible.

After becoming a university student, I'd been keeping myself from hugging that elementary school fifth-year ghost from behind or rubbing

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[14] アマビエ Amabie. A legendary creature said to ward off disease. Gained meme status during the COVID-19 pandemic as a "coronavirus countermeasure".

[15] The Takamatsu-Kotohira Railroad Co., Ltd., aka Kotoden, has a dolphin mascot named Koto-chan whose favorite food is udon.

our cheeks together or planting kisses on her or stripping off her clothes like I used to mischievously do, but now, there wasn't even any need for me to display such a forced sense of ethics.

What a world we lived in.

Such close contact was only allowed between family members. Good grief, for what reason was I even alive, then? Was I only supposed to mess around with my sisters for the rest of my life?

Because staying at home made it riskier for family disputes to occur, I could say that I was at least glad that this didn't occur when I was on awful terms with my sisters or my parents. As a specialist in child abuse, I truly felt that.

Well, it was good that my hometown was peaceful.

It seemed that the "*Itadaki*-mask"[16] campaign of silent meals, which our local government proposed, had completely taken root. Those days when problem children would constantly hold lunch meetings were now a thing of the past.

But despite being peaceful, I couldn't help but say that it felt like a psychological lockdown... It made it harder for me to leave town, and even if in-person classes were to resume at university, I wasn't sure if I'd feel ready to leave my parents' home again.

Would I really be living with my parents forever?

Would I really have to take care of my sisters for the rest of my life?

In that sense, I was concerned about those two that had left this protected hometown... Of course, I was referring to Sengoku Nadeko and Hanekawa Tsubasa.

How were the two of them doing?

Really, how were they doing?

It was entirely my own fault that I was out of contact with Sengoku, and it was much too arrogant, or even insolent, for me to show concern for that old friend at all, but how could I remain calm after hearing the crazy rumor that, after graduating from middle school, she'd gone to the capital without even moving onto high school?

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[16] いただきます *itadakimasu*, a phrase said before a meal, with マスク *masuku* "mask".

What in the world happened…?

Even when I asked Tsukihi, she just pretended not to know…

And then, there was Hanekawa Tsubasa.

My Hanekawa Tsubasa.

Hanekawa… Even under normal circumstances, we'd been out of contact to the point that nobody knew where she was or what she was doing, but before we could track down her exact location, the world had ended up in this state—we'd managed to learn that she was volunteering to provide medical care on the African continent, but just when it seemed that that thread of information snapped off, this unavoidable situation began.

This infectious situation.

Even with all the mistakes and miscalculations, I felt that Japan had just barely put up a good fight, but when it came to foreign countries, the situations could be completely different even in the same pandemic—health care, political systems, cultural customs, social conditions, disparity, population density… We could divide it into any number of things. How much I needed to worry about Hanekawa would wildly fluctuate depending on which country she was in, but considering who she was, I doubted she was in a safe zone.

If anything, during this pandemic, she seemed like she would proactively travel to more difficult areas—the reason she cut off contact not just with me, but also with Hitagi and Oikura, was likely to avoid causing unnecessary (or perhaps justified) concern to those of us living in a peaceful country and to avoid dragging us into trouble, but I doubted even she could have predicted this pandemic so far.

Because she didn't know everything.

Well, if she was working as a volunteer in providing medical care, then was it not actually that much of a surprise, and was it something she expected would happen eventually?—was it within the bounds of "I only know what I know"? From what I knew, the intellectual sphere may or may not have said that, in this global society, an outbreak of infections was a probabilistic inevitability.

If so, then there was nothing I could do. I could only pray that she was safe.

Anxiously.

Seriously, I hate you, Oshino—

Normally, if she were to be overseas, that class representative among class representatives, that honors student among honors students, should really instead be studying abroad at MIT or Cambridge or the like, but the reason she became a wandering backpacker after graduating from Naoetsu High was in no small part due to that Hawaiian-shirt guy's influence.

That wandering old man produced a wandering girl.

Of course, Oshino Meme's wandering was fundamentally restricted to being within the country, so Hanekawa had already surpassed her master... Well, when it came to that old man, I had no reason to worry.

No reason, and no obligation—if anything, it would just be out of gratitude.

Before even staying at home, Oshino didn't even have a home to begin with, so I couldn't exactly calmly wonder about how he was spending his days, but I had the baseless confidence that he was probably getting by somehow—perhaps that specialist had found another abandoned cram school to take shelter in, and perhaps he had entered into negotiations with Amabie-sama, but there was no point going on about what-ifs.

But, because it was a time like this, I wanted to hear it.

"You sure are spirited, Araragi-kun. Did something good happen?"

That pretentious line of his.

Hearing it might even lift my spirits.

It was possible that "the onee-san who knew everything", Gaen Izuko-san, would tell me about Hanekawa's or Oshino's whereabouts if I asked her, but right now, we had cut ties to great acclaim[17]... And it wasn't because of social distancing.

It was the antonym, personal distancing.

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[17] 絶賛 *zessan* "great acclaim", 絶縁 *zetsuen* "cutting ties".

But if she were going to tell me, then I would like it if she told me about how Ononoki-chan and Ougi-chan were currently doing—a person that does not treasure his connections can easily become isolated in times like these.

A solitary death, much like a vampire.

It seemed so likely to happen that it was laughable.

Well, when it came to those two, the corpse doll and the "darkness", it was hard to even figure out what I should be worrying about in the first place—if anything, they were a pair that were especially reliable in times of chaos like these.

A shining corpse and a shining darkness.

I'd heard through a different route from Tsukihi that Ononoki-chan was sticking close to Sengoku, so it'll be fine no matter what happened, which was a bit of a relief. And Ougi-chan, who had resolved to stay at Naoetsu High, would surely keep protecting that high school, and not only the juniors in the girls' basketball team... Though her form of protection was rather unique.

Well, in one way or another, everyone was managing to get by during this pandemic—the stage of panic, of people buying out toilet paper or being unable to acquire masks, was over for now.

Because things could be somewhat taken care of remotely, and out of concern that I might respond thoughtlessly, there were times when my responses were delayed, just like the in-person classes that were never restarting. But in spite of all that, I felt that I myself had gotten used to this staying-at-home lifestyle.

Though I wasn't sure if it was a good or bad thing to get used to this.

Even if the panic was over, the pandemic continued.

If the situation showed no signs of improvement, then it was better to adapt to online classes as best as possible, but if I got too used to being remote, then it might be even more tiring when in-person classes eventually resumed—what if I started feeling that it was too much of a hassle to attend university now, or that I didn't want to live on my own

anymore, or that there was no point to university now and I should just quit?

Even this specialist of child abuse couldn't exactly poke his nose into the affairs of others if he was sitting quietly at home, so in terms of matters unrelated to the pandemic, it was a peaceful period of self-restraint. I would not be catching a girl falling from the stairs, I would not meet a lost child, I would not be stalked by a superstar, I would not be bound by a snake curse, and I would not get entangled with a stray cat—nor would I get my sister killed by a zombie, be swallowed up by the Darkness, or be killed by my childhood friend.

I would not travel through time or fall to hell.

This story, which had ended and ended and yet kept ending, had now been completely lost. Even though this story had ended and ended and ended and ended and ended and ended and ended and ended and ended, and yet kept ending.

What a ridiculous story.

If this outbreak had occurred two years ago, then during that spring break, I would never have met Hanekawa, nor would I ever have met a vampire—or would I have encountered them remotely?

A livestream of a high school girl's skirt being flipped or of a vampire with her four limbs severed would be immediately banned, though.

As I saw off my sisters who were leaving for school at separate times, I was spending my free time deeply reflecting upon the "summary of everything so far", when...

"My master."

A voice was heard from my shadow—oh my.

That golden-haired young girl had been "staying at home" since that spring break two years ago, long before this period of self-restraint began (hiding herself first in the ruins of the abandoned cram school, and then in my shadow), but what was she doing, sluggishly crawling out in the morning?

Oshino Shinobu.

A golden-haired and golden-eyed young girl that looked to be eight years old.

However, her true form was the remnants of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire—the dregs of the King of Oddities that had lived for six hundred years.

Speaking of which, when we'd met, she'd deceptively rounded down her age to "five hundred years old", but two years later, she was now a young girl with a full six hundred years of experience that could not be rounded away.

The six-hundred-year-old young girl and the twenty-year-old me.

How stylish.

I hadn't really gotten excited about how a guy like me would greet his twentieth year—it was a huge disappointment that Meniko's surprise party had been suspended, but there was no doubt that the world had become engulfed in a much bigger surprise.

I hadn't had any intention of indulging in drinking or smoking the moment I turned twenty, but in a world where even elections were counted as risks, there was nothing new that could come from my birthday.

"I have a small proposal, but is now a good time, my master?"

"Yeah, it's fine. As you can see, I have nothing better to do, so I could use a good proposal. I'd love to fill in my blank schedule a little bit with any sort of plan."

I'd talked about how I'd gotten used to staying at home, but I wasn't exactly as much of a shut-in as you were... Now that I'd become keenly aware of the cruelty of binding this young girl to my shadow, I felt like I would hear out any request that she had.

What could it be? Donuts?

Recently, Mister Donut had changed their policy, and the number of high-class donuts had increased. They certainly seemed like they would fit Shinobu's tastes, with her being born of noble blood.

If Shinobu, who was nocturnal by nature, was awake in the morning, then perhaps her lifestyle had been disrupted in a way that was

hard to notice in this depressing world, so there was no problem with keeping her company as a diversion.

I wasn't exactly her attending servant anymore, but I was more than happy to attend to this young girl.

That was how I'd carelessly responded, but the six-hundred-year-old young girl and expert of staying at home easily surpassed the predictions of a beginner like me.

"I was thinking of taking a trip to Europe now, so how about you come along with me?"

002

"Shinobu. Sorry, but could you say that one more time? I couldn't hear you very well because of the delay."

"We are talking with our faces only a few centimeters apart, so what kind of delay are you talking about? Goodness, you don't have to be so shameless just because you want to talk a bit longer with me."

It was true that I was somewhat starved for conversation, but that wasn't the reason I was asking her to repeat her words. It wasn't because there had been a delay, but because I thought I'd misheard her.

Incidentally, Shinobu was bound to my shadow, so as long as it wasn't around sunset, there was no way we could practice social distancing.

Our distance could only be zero.

It was a distance of decadence.

Well, a few centimeters or a distance of zero may be an exaggeration, but we had no choice but to converse so intimately... Even if that Hawaiian-shirt specialist acted as though he saw through everything, there was no way he sealed Shinobu in my shadow predicting a situation like this.

Even though being intimate with a young girl should have had a good meaning.

"There is no way being intimate with a young girl could ever have a good meaning. But fine, listen well. I shall say it a second time, but there won't be a third, my master. I said, 'I was thinking of taking a trip to Europe now, so how about you come along with me?'"

"So I didn't mishear you..."

My shoulders drooped.

Rather than a third time, it felt like I was facing death.[18]

[18] 三度目 *sandome* "third time", 死に目 *shinime* "facing death".

How disappointing... I'd felt nothing but admiration towards Shinobu, who was my senior in a lifestyle of self-restraint, so I never expected that she would say something so lacking in awareness.

There was nothing more deplorable.

Not just going outside, but going overseas?

What brought this on?

Well, let's not get too discouraged.

This sort of friction had to be occurring all over Japan. I couldn't possibly be the sole exception.

All humans made mistakes, even if they weren't human.

And if we corrected those mistakes, they'd stop being mistakes.

"Shinobu, listen well. It's true that you and I might have the least amount of risk in this pandemic, but that's simply the risk of exhibiting symptoms or having our conditions worsen. It's not the risk of spreading the virus to others, you know?"

It was like, if we assumed the optimistic stance that Japanese people were less likely to show symptoms because of some unknown factor, we'd be shunned by the world at large.

Even if things were fine for us, it wasn't fine for everyone else.

Shinobu looked like a young girl, so her risk might comparatively be even lower, but the sample size was so small that there was probably no pandemic research institute that could make that judgment. That is, the risk of a former vampire young girl spreading a disease...

But if we thoughtlessly included her as a sample, it might skew the results entirely.

"Hmph. How foolish. If that Hawaiian-shirt brat can call himself an authority on monstrous apparitions, then as the king of vampires, I'm practically a specialist of pandemics. I can hold my head high."

"Is that so?"

Had she been invited to be a member of something? Was she providing comments on an acrylic board for some infotainment program?

But, thinking about it, the origin of vampires as an oddity wasn't entirely unrelated to the spread of a pandemic… Like vampires using bats that spread diseases as their thralls, or transforming into bats themselves, and the like.

And even if not for that, Shinobu was six hundred years old.

In terms of her experiences, she should know about the Spanish flu and the black plague—she was much more of an authority, compared to me, who only had knowledge of the novel coronavirus from what he'd seen on the news.

Even if she hadn't been infected herself, she should have been present for countless pandemics.

"If that's the case, then there's even less reason for you to say something like that. I thought you'd been acting pretty meek for a while, but now you're throwing out something completely nonsensical—Europe? Only Aikawa Jun would depart for Europe under circumstances like these."

After all, that red woman had been traveling in Venice when the state of emergency had been declared… We were really in different worlds, but she was truly an outrageous person.

As expected of humanity's strongest contractor.

Even when I was a full vampire, I would have no hope of beating her.

"Speaking of Venice, I recently got to read Manzoni's *The Betrothed* that people have been talking about. It was a historical masterpiece that I would never have gotten to read if it weren't for this opportunity, and because of that, I was thinking about how I could cultivate myself even in this period of self-restraint."

"Ah. I've read the first edition of that book."

Really? You're not just trying to one-up me?

It was like she was saying she read it before it was cool… But it was hard to imagine that this young girl, currently hooked on Japanese manga, had read that book before…

I couldn't help but look at her with doubt.

“It made me think about a lot of things. I used to be secretly worried about if we chatted too much about things unrelated to the main plot, but after reading *The Betrothed* or *Les Misérables*, I realized that what we were doing wasn’t nearly enough.”

“What the heck are you thinking about!?”

I was hit with a retort.

From the rascal that was trying to embark on a journey.

“Recall that those books are out of print in Japan. I may have read *Les Mis* the day it was released, but nowadays, you can only read the abridged version, right? If you’re going to learn from something, learn from that.”

That was quite a decent lecture…

Indeed, when I tried reading the unabridged translation of *Les Misérables* on Hitagi’s recommendation, I’d become discouraged partway through, thinking, “When is Jean Valjean going to show up!?”

It was impressive that they managed to adapt such a long story into a musical only a few hours long—well, I suppose our anime adaptations were the same sort of media mix.

I had better learn from it. Though I was done with entrance exams.

“But you know, I can’t deny that it’s gotten harder to have those developments where I would randomly encounter one of the heroines on the side of the road and we would have a meaningless yet long-winded exchange.”

“Indeed. With things as they are now, I’ve started to savor that meaningless chatter. So, no more grumbling. Let’s go to Europe!”

Despite that savoring, we really weren’t meshing together, my partner and I.[19]

If we were simply taking a short walk outside, then we would at least be protected by the god of walks within this town, so I didn’t need to be all that finicky about that, but when it came to overseas travel, how would I need to explain border control measures in a way this former noble would understand?—I was already at my limit acting as guardian

[19] 噛みしめる *kamishimeru* “to savor”, 噛み合う *kamiau* “to mesh together”.

for my two high schooler sisters, but if I had to look after a young girl on top of that...

Rather than being a guardian, it was more like day care.[20]

Because of the pandemic, day care centers and elementary schools were all closed, so it must be pretty hard for households with children always at home, but I never thought I'd be the one to experience that...

What to do?

Really, what to do?

Would she forget about it if I gave her some tasty donuts, was the sudden and impulsive idea I had... Before, I'd been able to shut her up with a kiss, but that was harder to do these days with close contact being forbidden. Er, even if it weren't for the pandemic, that method shouldn't be used on a young girl by a university student that had reached his twenties.

That was also something to learn from.

Mm, I guess I had no choice.

For now, she could say everything she had to say.

When two value systems clashed like this, rejecting the other party outright without even hearing them out would just lead to quarreling. I had to make sure this didn't lead to an argument.

Avoiding arguments, and blocking off counterarguments.

After all, there was no way she was suggesting going to Europe for a reason like, "Because there'll be less people at tourist attractions right now"—though I've heard that the canals of Venice had become much clearer because the number of tourists had decreased.

Thanks to the pandemic, stock prices had even risen because there was less to spend on otherwise. It was a new normal where not just the theoretical, but even the unimaginable was made possible. Anything could happen.

Even the supernatural was now natural.

So, with what reasoning was this supernatural golden-haired young girl trying to lure me, her master, into going on a trip?

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[20] 保護者 *hogosha* "guardian", 保育 *hoiku* "day care, nursing".

“Well, ‘just because’, really. A flash of inspiration. It should be fine, right? I’m sure nothing bad will happen. Probably.”

“You’re crazy.”

To think that I’d been in a team with such a crazy girl for over fifteen years… Was it like when people invite you to a meal that you can’t refuse, which I’d heard about every so often?

It’s like, yikes.

Oh yeah, right, it was with this lighthearted mood that this girl lured me into a time slip… And there’d been a time when, instead of hell, she’d sent me off to heaven.

Rather than *The Betrothed* or *Les Misérables*, it was more like the *Divine Comedy* or *Faust*, now.

In that case, I’d like it if we could make it to *The Decameron*.

“What’s with *The Decameron*? Don’t start acting like a scholar after reading a couple books. Even though you would say something like, ‘The class rep’s breasts are deca-melons!’ when you were in high school.”[21]

“Was I really that vulgar?”

Don’t try to fabricate my character.

Or lack of character.[22]

Considering that Hanekawa’s whereabouts were unknown and she was completely out of contact, that wasn’t just unrestrained. It was something she should restrain herself from saying.

Well, perhaps I’d said something similar, but I wasn’t a high schooler anymore. As for whether or not I was currently a university student, I was kind of walking a fine line, but either way, I would no longer make breast-related jokes about Hanekawa.

Breast-related.

I could probably fill about thirty pages with such heart-throbbing words, but I’ll ignore that urge.

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[21] デカメロン *dekameron* “Decameron”, can be read as デカ *deka* (short for デカい *dekai* “massive”) メロン *meron* “melons”.

[22] 品のない *hin no nai* “vulgar”, 品性 *hinsei* “character”. The final line uses 下品性 *gehinsei*, which is a portmanteau of 下品 *gehin* “vulgar” and 品性 *hinsei* “character”.

“It was after Isaac Newton had to stay at home due to a pandemic that he witnessed an apple falling from a tree and discovered the law of universal gravitation. I’d like to be the same as him, so don’t try to tempt me.”

“That Newton was a famous European, was he not? If you want to be the same as him, you’d better travel there!”

“How tempting. As tempting as apple-like breasts.”

“Who are you saying has apple-like breasts!? You couldn’t ignore your breast-related urges at all, could you?”

She glared at me.

However, the episode about discovering the law of universal gravitation by watching an apple fall was more of a tall tale, so it was hard to judge how much of that anecdote to believe.

“Though, even if they’re apples, they would just be crabapples.”

“You’d probably win even if you were sued in a seventeenth-century court.”

“Or maybe they’re plums. The plum pickers plucked the plump plums.[23]”

“Do you want me to plunge you into the sea? Do you want me to plump plum plunge you?[24] Into the Caspian Sea.”

I wasn’t just joking around here. For some time now, I’d been trying to change the subject by weaving in the meaningless chatter that I’d learned from *The Betrothed*, but it wasn’t going too well—with her bringing up the Caspian Sea, it seemed this young girl had a strong attachment to Europe.

Not that I was able to intuitively remember if the Caspian Sea was in Europe, since it had been a while since I’d needed to study geography—but, intuition.

Inspiration…

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[23] 李も桃も桃のうち *sumomo mo momo mo momo no uchi*. A Japanese tongue twister that literally means “Both plums and peaches are in the peach family.”

[24] Shinobu originally said 海の藻屑 *umi no mokuzu* “(send you to) a watery grave”, before following up with ももももも屑 *momomomomokuzu*, referencing the previous tongue twister.

I'd found myself not taking her as seriously after she'd given the reason of "just because", but if it really was a flash of inspiration for her, then the circumstances were slightly different.

Because it wasn't the inspiration of just anyone.

It was the inspiration of the former King of Oddities.

A sixth sense, or a supernatural sense—if an oddity spoke of it, then it held meaning beyond just simply sounding dubious.

"For one thing, 'tis simply unbearable to have to see my master yield to peer pressure in such a way. It really puts a damper on my mood. Being thrown this way and that by a high-pressure system makes my temper into a low-pressure system. Since when did you become such a slave-like character?"

"Wouldn't it be when you made me into your slave? If I really did become one."

Besides, what was so different between yielding to peer pressure and yielding to the pressure you're putting on me?—as I thought that, I carefully began to dig deeper. Since she herself offered up the keyword of "inspiration", she probably wasn't going to be a golden-haired loli slave that was up front with her responses.

I'd have to come at her from behind.

"Even if you mention Europe, there are lots of countries there. Countries not a part of the European Union, and countries that haven't signed the Schengen Agreement. You'd be making a huge mistake if you assume that Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, and Northern Europe are all part of the same cultural sphere."

I was recycling knowledge that I'd heard from Hanekawa once in the past.

Though it wasn't exactly knowledge for entrance exams.

However, especially now that we'd lost contact with Hanekawa, it was evident that disease control measures were all over the place for each country, Japan included—globalism was pretty difficult.

You could even call it global distancing.

By the time this novel gets published, what might have happened to the Olympics and the Paralympics?—I really wanted to ask for the opinion of our own athlete, Kanbaru.

"If there are countries that are under lockdown, then there are countries just trying to achieve herd immunity without any strong countermeasures, so it's not exactly impossible if you want to go to one of the latter countries—"

Or, was it?

As a university student that had rarely even left the prefecture, I had no idea what it was like to try and fly overseas in a situation like this, so I didn't know the specifics of the inspections and quarantines that took place during immigration and emigration.

The fact that they could ignore information irrelevant to them in a situation like this really showed that humans were selfish creatures. It made me doubt if humans really were meant to be social creatures.

They were a far cry from bees or ants.

Even if we managed to leave, if we weren't allowed to return, then that wasn't traveling but being exiled—perhaps I hadn't lived my life in the most ethical way, but I hadn't exactly done anything bad enough to deserve exile. Assuming I hadn't done something so terrible that I'd lost my memory afterwards.

"—Shinobu-san. What part of Europe do you want to go to?"

"Greenland."

"Greenland!?"

Was that country in Europe?

Right, it was... It was a territory of Denmark.

"No, just kidding. A bit of humor to lighten the mood."

So in her own way, Shinobu was keeping an eye out to prevent these stressful times from becoming even more tense... Weaving in laughter at every turn.

Even if it wasn't funny.

Speaking of which, this vampire had even spent some time at the South Pole, hadn't she—and maybe they'd just been empty words, but

she'd said, on that spring break two years ago, that she'd come to Japan for some sightseeing.

Considering what happened to her afterwards, though, it was more like she'd barely survived with a life of exile.[25]

As for me, I hadn't barely survived, but had become a corpse-like empty shell.[26]

"Apparently, there were confirmed cases of the coronavirus even at the South Pole, and the theory that oddities don't exist on that continent are now a thing of the past. In the end, it's still unclear whether or not outbreaks are more likely to occur in colder places."

In the summer, people are more active, so infections spread more easily, right? At least, according to my current understanding.

"If you think about it on a global scale, it's always summer somewhere and winter somewhere else."

As expected, the point of view of a six-hundred-year-old was immense.

That could be why she didn't really understand the severity of this disease... Even though, for us, this was a historic event that would happen only once in a century, for her, perhaps this was nothing more than "the usual".

Things ended up working out in the previous case, the case before the previous case, and the case even before that, so it'll be all right this time, was maybe how she saw it?

In that case, it was unreasonable to criticize her for it, but I couldn't turn a blind eye to it, either—so all I did was ask her again. "So, where do you really want to go?"

Well, I'd arrogantly cited one of Hanekawa's statements, but it had been a while since I'd finished my entrance exams, so I didn't even know how many countries were in the European Union after the United Kingdom withdrew (over twenty, I think—). But even before that, I wasn't sure if I could even name all the countries of Europe.

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[25] 亡命 *boumei* "exile". The *kanji* can be interpreted to mean "loss of life", though there is no real linguistic connection to death.

[26] からがら *karagara* "barely", 亡骸 *nakigara* "corpse", 抜け殻 *nukegara* "empty shell".

I was secretly tensing up out of fear that she'd bring up a country I barely remembered and expose my ignorance, but Shinobu said,

"As for its location, in terms of the Western, Eastern, Southern, and Northern Europe that you mentioned, it's right in the middle of them,"

being rather vague in her description.

Central Europe?

Was that even a real term?

"Shinobu, I'm asking you for a specific name."

"There's no point in asking. It's a country that fell to ruin a long time ago,"

said Shinobu, indifferently.

Indifferently, and uninterestedly.

"It's not even left in history books. Even I've completely forgotten, so there's probably no one that remembers the name of that country now—I've carefully forgotten it all.[27]"

"……?"

With her blending in a homophone at the end, it ended up stirring my thoughts a bit, but what, fell to ruin? Not an exile from the country, but a ruined country?

Well, it wasn't like I was expecting her to be planning a "Paris–San Sebastian Round Trip Foodie Tour"… Not to mention, the idea that France and Spain weren't the only countries in Europe was precisely the point I'd been trying to make, but still, a ruined country was pretty shocking… Wasn't it too high-level of a destination for a shadow shut-in to suddenly visit?

"So far from quarantines or isolation periods, we won't even need passports. If it's too hard to be careful with no country name, then for the timing, let us call it the Acerola Kingdom."

Shinobu seemed weirdly attached to the pun of "country name" and "careful", but putting that aside, the Acerola Kingdom.

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[27] 国名 *kokumei* "country name", 克明 *kokumei* "careful".

That made it sound like a kingdom that was under your rule, former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, speaking like Ononoki-chan—hm?

Acerola?

Princess Acerola?

"Besides, my master. We're only forbidden from leaving home for non-essential and non-urgent reasons."

Shinobu shrugged her shoulders.

I expected that the natural extension to that statement would be, "It's fine to leave for essential or urgent reasons," but as expected of a former noble, the former princess's words were different.

"If it's not leaving home, but returning home, then I'm sure it's fine."

003

Not leaving home, but returning home.

It was quite a witty thing to say, but if that Acerola Kingdom (temp.) was indeed the country—the ruined country—that I was thinking of, then even more strictly speaking, it would not be returning home, but returning to her home country.

Because she'd been given the Japanese name of Oshino Shinobu by Oshino Meme, and because she'd completely fit in over the past two years, I'd been treating her as basically Japanese. But as a vampire, Shinobu was in fact a non-native species—not to mention, she'd been the princess of a different country.

She'd been called Princess Acerola.

Or perhaps, "Princess Beauty".

With that in mind, "ruined country" didn't mean that it had fallen to ruin because of war or anything like that—it was a kingdom that she herself had brought to ruin, when she had still been human.

Before she had become a vampire... A kingdom that had fallen to ruin five hundred ninety-two years ago? No, that wasn't it. Shinobu looked eight years old now because of me, but it wasn't her official age.

"Rather than it being because of you, it's because this age suits your preferences."

"In your complete, original form, you were around twenty-five to twenty-seven years old, right?"

I promptly ignored Shinobu's off-the-mark comment and recalculated—though it was just subtraction too simple to really be called recalculation. But it would have been a small country that fell to ruin about five hundred seventy years ago. Regardless, it had been long enough ago that it made sense for the country name to no longer be known.

It was history.

My goodness...

But if it was the “remains of a noble lady’s dreams”[28], why was she trying to revisit it now? Returning home… With this calamity having befallen the entire world, it was difficult enough to return to one’s home country, so the memory of special flights going here and there during the initial stages of the pandemic was still fresh in my mind—it was natural to want to return to one’s home country with the threat of an impending emergency.

You could even call it a homing instinct.

Since a part of me wished that Hanekawa would do the same, it seemed pretty reasonable to me that Shinobu would want to return to her birthplace—that is, if it weren’t a ruined country.

If not for that, this would have quite the feel of a final episode.

For a beloved freeloader, who came from another country or another world, to return home—it wasn’t worth referencing the famous works of Fujiko Fujio yet… However, what did she want to do after returning to the Acerola Kingdom (temp.)?

It wasn’t like she was going to set up a system for medical care. The country didn’t even have any citizens.

“Ka ka. That’s for sure. Seeing as I was the one to kill everyone.”

“If that crime was committed about five hundred and seventy years ago, the statute of limitations would have long since expired…”

Don’t just say “Ka ka”.

You may have been the one to bring it up, but is that something I can really laugh at?

Rather than disparaging yourself, it was more of a confession.

A confession that could be used as evidence.

“Strictly speaking, it was not I that killed them, but that my beauty led the citizens to kill themselves. Something like that.”

What a crazy record of a country’s fall.

Really, it wasn’t something you could dismiss with a “something like that”.

Don’t pass off your crimes as mere history.

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[28] Referencing a haiku by Matsuo Bashō, a part of *Oku no Hosomichi*.

And yet, it wasn't as though she was exaggerating... In the "Mirror World", I myself had had an audience with that "Princess Beauty" and had come close to disemboweling myself—Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, who was heretical for a vampire, was also a heretical princess when she was human.

She might have even been more dreadful as a human.

With a beauty that could overwhelm her country's citizens.

In order to break free from that curse, Princess Acerola chose to become a vampire of her own accord—it had taken quite a while before she told me the whole story.

Even as unreserved as Shinobu was, it was probably a subject she wasn't very willing to broach—it was something she could only speak of as the history of some other person. Of course, it could also be that she simply didn't remember too much about when she was human.

Even *I* had managed to forget my childhood friend.

That had ended up being quite the problem.

"There may actually be some crazy travel package that can take us to visit ruined countries, but is there really a need to go at this very moment? If we can't contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, even Japan might end up falling to ruin, so why go all the way to Europe?"

In this case, it was scary to think that "Japan might end up falling to ruin" might not just be empty words. This pandemic really made you think about the fragility of national borders.

Both national and prefectural borders were arbitrary lines drawn by humans, after all.

"With me having returned to my parents' home like this, it's not like I don't understand you feeling nostalgic for home, but..."

"As if. 'Tis not as if I'm feeling homesick or anything."

"Really? Then why...? Trying to do something that might make you actually sick, not just homesick... If it's not sightseeing, and it's not returning home—"

"Like I said, it's 'just because'."

Inspiration.

Shinobu repeated.

"'Just because'—I just got the feeling that something has happened. Not a premonition, but a *demon*-ition, so to speak.[29] To my sworn friend."

"Sworn friend?"

"To Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster."

For a moment, I didn't realize who she was talking about, but that was the fault of my own perceptiveness—I should have been able to guess from the moment she'd said "sworn friend". If anything, I should have been able to guess that the matter was about "her" from the moment Shinobu brought up going to Europe.

That in itself would have been a flash of inspiration.

Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster—you could say that she played the same role as the role Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade played for me. Five hundred and seventy-something years ago, she bit into the neck of Princess Acerola, sucked her blood, and turned that princess into a vampire—a true ancestor, of sorts.

One year ago, she had dropped in on Japan.

For the sake of sightseeing, at that.

Just with the mere act of dropping in, she had given rise to quite the flashy incident that had even gotten my alma mater involved, but, well, let's put that aside for now—ultimately, she had been forced to leave the country.

But before she left, Suicidemaster and Shinobu had been able to reunite for the first time in hundreds of years... I didn't want to be a bother to them, but even before that, a newcomer like me had no room to cut into their conversation, so I had no idea what the two vampires ended up talking about.

There were probably tons of things to talk about. Centuries' worth.

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[29] 虫の知らせ *mushi no shirase* "premonition", literally "warning of a bug" (the "bug" in this case refers to bad things in general). Shinobu amends this to 鬼の知らせ *oni no shirase*, "warning of a demon".

And so, in order to continue talking about everything they hadn't managed to yet discuss, Shinobu would be the one to visit Suicidemaster instead—but, no, that was almost certainly not the reason.

Something had happened—to her sworn friend.

She'd called it a *demon*-ition, but this was probably something beyond that. It likely went beyond inspiration and was closer to something like telepathy—after all, she was talking about the one that had turned her into a vampire.

It wasn't on the same level as the pairing between me and Shinobu, but their invisible connection wasn't something that would completely fade from just five hundred and seventy-something years—especially because they had reunited just a year ago.

Bonds—

"Something happened, you say... But what, exactly?"

"I do not know that much. I can't even say so with confidence. It could just be my imagination."

In spite of her unconfident words, her tone of voice was entirely unwavering—there was surely an intuitive reason for her intuition.

"Do you think she was exterminated by a vampire hunter?"

"Perhaps so. But she was always one to die frequently—to be honest, when we met last year, it was actually surprising to see that she was still alive."

So I wouldn't get this odd feeling if she died a normal death—said Shinobu, putting together an odd sort of logic.

Mhm...

Well, in times like these, I also happened to be keenly aware of the feeling of worrying about friends I hadn't been able to meet up with like usual.

It felt like my heart would burst at every moment, imagining what Hitagi and Oikura and Meniko were up to right now—of course, I was capable of coping in one way or another, but I couldn't go without worrying at all.

And that feeling was what Shinobu was feeling now, but in a way only vampires could feel—towards her one and only "sworn friend" of six hundred years.

How enviable.

But I understood her—it wasn't like I was getting any sort of sixth sense, and I of all people had the least right to get anxious about her, but if I could, I would want to go and see Hanekawa.

Even if she were in space.

"Exactly. Deathy[30] is to me as that class rep girl is to you."

"When people were screaming about mask shortages, I was seriously agonizing over if I'd be able to modify Hanekawa's bra into a mask, y'know."

"I shall pretend that I didn't hear what you just said, so pretend that you didn't hear what I just said."

Well, regardless of the specifics of what she'd just said.

There was still an inescapable dilemma that arose.

Kanbaru, for example, was in a similar situation: by living together with her elderly grandparents, being able to see them nearby made it easier to achieve peace of mind, but at the same time, there was a higher risk... From my point of view, Suicidemaster was basically a grandparent to me with Shinobu between us, and in that sense, perhaps it was more logical to keep her at a distance and worry about her from afar.

Home is where I think of when I am far away.[31]

Friends will come from far away.[32]

Now, then, what to do?

I needed to consider this carefully.

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[30] デス *desu*, shortened from デストピア *desutopia* "Deathtopia". Technically the nickname would simply be "Death", but I think "Deathy" keeps it affectionate while not overlapping with, like, the personification of death.

[31] Reference to the poem 小景異情 *shoukei ijou* by Saisei Murou. (There's no English source to give a proper English title for the poem, but if I were to translate it myself, it would be "Fine Scenery, Odd Feelings".)

[32] Reference to a line from the *Analects* of Confucius.

As mentioned above, as someone who was basically a grandchild, I wasn't experiencing any sort of intuition, but surely Shinobu had felt "something".

It was fine to believe her without evidence.

If so, then there was no reason to underestimate the danger level.

After all, Suicidemaster was not just a vampire, but a true ancestor. It was hard to imagine that she contracted the novel coronavirus and her condition was worsening, but there were plenty of other predicaments she could be in. It might not be my place to say this, but that true ancestor was not particularly a cautious vampire—her death rate was even higher than that of a rookie like me.

It was just as Shinobu had said.

Even just during her visit last year, how many times had she died in total?

As such, if there were some unavoidable circumstances, then it was natural for Shinobu to want to rush to her side. And, seeing as she'd followed me around as a golden-haired loli slave at my convenience for so long, I would be happy to accompany her if it was something I was capable of. I wanted to be of help—I wanted her to let me help her. Even if it was something I couldn't do anything about.

However, practically speaking, there was a bigger obstacle, a bigger difficulty, in the act of visiting a ruined country when compared to visiting a famous tourist destination—it wouldn't be so simple even in ordinary times.

The Shinobu of two years ago, and the Suicidemaster of last year, hadn't exactly flown into Japan on an airplane... But for the current Shinobu, who had almost entirely lost the power of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, it seemed unlikely that she would be able to do the same thing.

On the other hand, when it came to the idea of taking any normal means of transportation, then I had to say it made me feel a bit scared—I hadn't even been on a boat before, let alone a plane. And even if we didn't need passports to enter a ruined country, there was no way

Shinobu would be officially allowed to depart with no nationality or family register.

Not when departing, and not when returning, either.

"And even if we somehow found a back channel that let us safely leave the country, there's still the problem I brought up in the beginning. The chance of us exhibiting any symptoms if we catch the virus may be extremely low, but there's no denying the possibility that we can still spread it to others."

"My land has already fallen to ruin, so 'tis not like there are any citizens there we can spread it to."

What a surreal response.

However, even if that were true.

"There would still be a risk while we're on the way there. That's the problem with human mobility. There's also the reverse possibility where we unintentionally bring the virus back from overseas..."

If someone were to tell me that it was inhuman of me to try and increase human mobility during this pandemic, then paradoxically, it wouldn't be hard to say that it wasn't human mobility at all—considering we were a two-man cell of former vampires.

"I see. Your concerns are indeed reasonable. However, I have a plan—simply put, we just need to prevent the spread of the disease, correct?"

She had a triumphant expression, but it didn't seem as though she was going to reveal what her plan was at the moment—rather than grandstanding, it was more likely she had hatched up a plan that I wouldn't approve of.

She was surprisingly calculating.

Her idea was surely worthless.

And her rough wording of "simply put" made me especially uneasy... Whenever Shinobu strung together a plan, it usually just made me high-strung.[33]

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[33] The original pun is 案 *an* "plan" and 不安 *fuan* "unease".

Nevertheless, it wasn't as though I had any sort of alternative plan—so perhaps I had no choice but to deal with whatever problems that came up, one by one.

I wasn't going to press her on the matter.

Humanity had learned many things over the past few months, but perhaps one of the most important was, "We must not sow discord."

We must be cautious of the potential to breed hostility.

"Then, assuming we're going with your plan for now, let's say we've managed to safely leave the country and travel to our destination. Let's say we were able to not bother anyone along the way. That's not necessarily impossible. After returning, we could voluntarily spend two weeks of quarantine in, let's see... I know, how about a mysterious space made by Ougi-chan like Class 1-3? But still, even if we could somehow pull off such a crazy tightrope act, it's pretty much guaranteed that Gaen-san would get extremely mad at us."

Just imagining the future of being lectured seriously by that smiley onee-san (who I'd currently cut ties with) was enough to make my skull feel like it was caving in.

Originally, after entering university, Shinobu and I were supposed to be monitored by Gaen-san—so a corpse doll had resided in my room for quite a while (technically, it was my sister's room, but, well, it may as well be mine). Perhaps we'd been given the clear, or maybe there was some other reason, but Ononoki-chan's monitoring had been shifted over to Sengoku (or maybe there was no rhyme or reason to it). But that didn't mean we were completely safe just yet... I wasn't totally confident that our probationary period had ended. Considering it hadn't even been half a year since Ononoki-chan had left, if we were found to be conspiring to leave the country, then it was possible we wouldn't just be monitored again, but even listed as a target for extermination.

Even if we could quietly sneak out and sneak back in, I couldn't think that we'd be able to slip past the eyes of the "onee-san that knew everything"—I couldn't even begin to think that. It was possible she'd already anticipated that we were trying to work out a plan like this.

“So, instead of trying to smuggle ourselves out of the country, I don’t think we have any other choice but to ask for permission from that administrator to leave... Putting aside my own recklessness, the transfer of a golden-haired young girl is basically like an arms transfer, after all.”

“How bothersome. Do as you see fit.”

Was I really in the position of a “master” at this point?

Rather than being my slave, it was more like she was pushing all the work onto me.

It was less the behavior of a master and more the behavior of a princess. Princess Acerola...

For a princess, it was a matter of course that she would have to engage in all the necessary procedures when leaving or entering the country—but, since we’d cut ties, it was going to be hard to request permission from Gaen-san... She was probably going to impose one-man border control measures onto me. Particularly strong ones, at that.

Even if she didn’t get mad at me, she’d probably just flat out tell me “no”.

Maybe I shouldn’t have carelessly cut ties with her back then.

“Now. Use that twenty-year-old university student intelligence of yours and think of something already, my master.”

“You’re asking a bit much from a university student!”

Especially one that was only twenty years old.

Well, I had to come up with something.

For better or for worse.

Erm, putting it all together—the three points of “a means of transportation to a ruined country”, “infection control measures for a pandemic”, “securing our safety after returning home” were the most pressing matters at hand.

For one, the matter of “infection control measures” could be tentatively entrusted to Shinobu—but the “means of transportation” and “securing our safety” weren’t very simple.

The former involved dealing with governmental organizations, and the latter involved dealing with that onee-san that we were no match for. Both were formidable. Even if I were to admit defeat from the outset and perform my specialty of prostration, I didn't expect Gaen-san would send us off with a smile... Even without taking into account the idea of oddities and all that, performing such a reckless move in a situation like this was something any adult should properly rebuke. Even if she didn't get mad, she'd probably just say "no".

It was harder for me to get approval than for vaccines.

Maybe it was worth a shot to try contacting her, but if she completely shut down the plan itself, then it would end up being worth nothing at all... That said, I didn't have the slightest bit of courage to openly defy her, either—

"....."

To openly defy her.

Doing something like that against Gaen-san was an act of barbarity that not even her juniors under her direct supervision, Oshino and even Kaiki, were capable of—but, come to think of it, there was one, after all.

A specialist only capable of acts of barbarity.

That's right. Even in our world, there existed someone who possessed a level of violence that could rival Aikawa Jun... Ah, this is killing two birds with one stone, isn't it?

My goodness.

If I were to rely on that violent *onmyouji*, the two matters I was in charge of could potentially be resolved at the same time. Though it was certainly a risky venture... A gamble where my odds of winning were the same as my odds of dying. Fortunately or unfortunately, even though I had cut ties with Gaen-san, *her* contact information was still registered in my cell phone.

Ever since that winter of my third year in high school.

But I was still a bit reluctant...

Or rather, she was the kind of fearsome negotiator that could choose to exterminate me as soon as I made my request, but now that I'd thought of it, I couldn't go without trying this option out.

Even if it was an attempt more dangerous than going overseas.

Would it be a journey abroad, or a journey to the next world?

"Well, we're setting off to help out Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster. Starting off with a suicide mission seems right, don't you think?"

"Quite true. Besides, there is no safe place left on this Earth, anyway."

Was it really that bad?

Considering the young girl had borne direct witness to infections running rampant many times over, her words seemed to hold more weight, and I began to tremble at the thought that my sense of danger had not been enough. But I needed to turn my trembling into that of excitement.

In order to confront the violent *onmyouji*: Kagenui Yozuru.

I had to become a warrior.

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At some level, I was simply curious.

My curiosity could not be contained.

Worrying about her was not something I could really conceptualize, but how exactly was Kagenui-san getting by during this pandemic?

I'd considered that her exclusive *shikigami*, Ononoki-chan, was a corpse doll, and so was completely divorced from the concept of pandemics. But tentatively (×100), Kagenui-san was a human, so it wouldn't be as though she were immune to disease. I'd heard there were a certain number of people that were incapable of catching colds, but I doubted that there existed a person that possessed antibodies or immunity against all kinds of sicknesses.

Having said that, she certainly didn't seem like the type to silently isolate herself at home... I doubted that any lockdown could be capable of sealing in Kagenui-san, no matter how powerful the authority that ordered it was.

Kagenui-san's shadow could not be sewed down.[34]

If there was anything that imposed a restraint on her, it would be an eccentric curse that made it so that "she could not walk on the surface of the Earth".

At one point, thanks to Ougi-chan's machinations, she'd gotten stuck in the North Pole, but it was hard to say that counted as being shut in... Anyway, I couldn't deny that a sudden urge to learn about Kagenui Yozuru's present state was partially pushing me forward.

If it weren't for that, I would never have called a specialist based on something like "Shinobu's intuition", something that a third party would consider too vague—especially not if the other party was a specialist of immortal oddities.

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[34] Kagenui's name (影縫) is itself a reference to 影縫い *kagenui* or "shadow sewing", a technique from ninja legends that could supposedly immobilize an opponent by pinning their shadow to the ground with a kunai.

Our natural enemy.

In a more opportune time, it wouldn't be a surprise if that violent *onmyouji* decided to exterminate us—when Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster had visited this town, Gaen-san had even called her over from the North Pole as a trump card.

In that sense, she could be unexpectedly suited for the role.

Though, at the same time, it was the role of the villain—but anyway.

"Greetings, Araragi-kun. Ah, happy twentieth birthday, by the way."

Our conversation began with the twist of Kagenui-san being the first to give me birthday wishes outside of my family—so she'd remembered when my birthday was, huh? Although it was possible she only knew my information as a target needing to be monitored...

Though I'd be lying if I said I wasn't happy.

It was a belated yet pleasant surprise.

"Still, the world has gone all sorts of crazy, ain't it? Who'da thunk that I'd be in a future where I'm having a remote conference with Araragi-kun through a video call. Couldn't've imagined it when we first met."

"That's for sure."

It was indeed, as you may have guessed, a Zoom meeting.

For the incarnation of violence known as Kagenui-san, the idea of her being able to use a smartphone in itself went against my instincts, but unlike Oshino, who could barely handle a pay phone or a rotary phone, it seemed she was surprisingly in tune with electronic devices.

Speaking of which, she did buy Ononoki-chan a kids' cell phone when employing her as a *shikigami*—incidentally, I'd had Shinobu leave my room for the time being.

Leave my room, and enter my shadow.

The domestic comedy of a young girl barging in on a remote meeting was not something I wanted to happen here... But Kagenui-san and Shinobu shared a complex connection (it was something I couldn't

care less about, but in the past, Kagenui-san had stepped on Shinobu's head).

There was a bit of lag, but the image was clear. It had been about a year since I'd last spoken to Kagenui-san, but aside from her hair having grown a bit, she seemed the same as ever... At the very least, it didn't seem as though she'd piled up any stress from the pandemic.

Well, a person like this could easily relieve stress whenever she wanted. Just by meaninglessly destroying whatever object was closest to her.

This wasn't exactly a remote cliché, but since it was a video call, I'd been secretly wondering if I could get a better idea of Kagenui-san's character by looking at the state of her room. But, it was as expected of the junior of the "onee-san that knew everything", or as expected of the colleague of the Hawaiian-shirt guy that could see through everything. As if she'd seen through the many ways in which a lowlife might think, the background of this video call had been composited with a different image.

What a delicate technique.

I'd had this image of her as a somewhat unreserved, or even crude, kind of person, but perhaps she actually valued her privacy pretty highly.

Not to mention, she still hadn't told me the whole story about making Ononoki-chan her *shikigami*.

On top of that, the background image was in fact a depiction of European scenery... She clearly was an underclassman of Gaen-san and a colleague of Oshino.

Such unpleasant fellows she'd associated with.

With her pulling off all these things from the very outset like this, it was hard for me to execute my own plans... Incidentally, where in Europe was this scenery? It seemed a bit like Eastern Europe... In the distance behind the townscape, there was a pretty impressive-looking castle, which made it a great photo.

Was it the work of a pro?

"So, what seems to be the matter? Araragi-kun."

“Well, I was wondering if you were doing all right, you see. The world has gotten a little crazy, hasn’t it?”

I’d completely fallen into the habit of bringing up the pandemic as though I were commenting on the weather, but either way, when I began my approach like that,

“I dunno much about the world and all, but it’s true that I’ve been plenty busy these days. If it was gonna be like this, I woulda stayed up at the North Pole a little longer,”

was her reply.

Since we were talking over the phone like this, it was nice to feel a sense of security from the fact that I wouldn’t be suddenly punched out of the blue… But, as expected, it did feel like she lived at a level beyond the affairs of the world.

In that sense, she was like a hermit, though in a different way than her colleague Oshino—in fact, her inability to set foot on the ground was an actual curse.

So she was busy, huh?

“Did something happen with the former Heartunderblade?”

Oops.

Just when I’d indulged a bit in my own thoughts, she’d cut to the heart of the matter without a moment’s delay—if I continued to let my guard down just because it was a phone call, I could find myself in a mounted position (in the martial arts sense).

Should I have schemed something to take her by surprise, too, like putting the Araragi Harem in the background of my video feed?

Although the result of that scheme would probably be her pulling some kung fu moves on me.

“No, no, Shinobu is perfectly fine. Staying at home is her forte, after all. She knows the Three Closes[35] like the back of her hand. Since

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[35] 三密 *san-mitsu* is a slogan made by the Japanese government to combat the pandemic, referring to three factors that can contribute to infection: 密閉 “closed spaces”, 密集 “crowded places”, and 密接 “close-contact settings”, all starting with the *kanji* 密, which means “close” or “dense”. It’s often translated as “Three Cs”, but there’s a prevalence of 密 used throughout the story which had me translate it as “Three Closes” for a clearer association.

she is completely sealed in my shadow, she is perfectly safe, with no fear of her causing harm to anyone else. We are following the rules that have been set for us with no exceptions. That golden-haired loli slave is not planning a thing."

"Mhm."

Huh, that was a curt response.

Even though I'd showed so many chinks in my armor for her to break into.

It was true that Shinobu and I were most likely unsatisfying opponents for Kagenui-san, but if she was going to treat me this lightly, it almost made me want to let everything slip without her even having to wring it out of me.

Actually, the two of us are recklessly planning an excursion overseas, you know? I wanted to reveal it like that—but, no, I would ultimately be better off not making such a revelation.

Since I had made the call without any prior rehearsal, I was struggling to come up with the most inoffensive phrasing of my request, but once again, it was like she'd outmaneuvered me yet again.

"In that case, makes it easy for me to ask the two of you for a favor,"

she said.

A favor?

"Yep. Much obliged to receive your call."

I had never expected to hear such a stereotypically sociable phrase from Kagenui-san, so there really were benefits to living a long life—I was glad I didn't die at seventeen years old.

Or so I'd been admiring, but after hearing what she had to say, I thought I might actually die.

Die of shock at twenty years old.

"Y'see, I was almost thinkin' I should be the one to call you first. Really, really. Surprisin' how good your timing was. Araragi-kun, d'you mind comin' together with the former Heartunderblade to where I am? I happen to be around Romania right now."

"……!"

Wha? Hold on a second, Romania?

By Romania, did she mean *that* Romania?

Romania, from that bad joke of, "What country likes curry the most?" that was answered with "Roux-mania"?[36] The one you could retort with, "If it was called Curry-mania, then they wouldn't actually put roux in," *that* Romania?

"You an idiot? Why're you fixating so much on bad jokes?"

When she retorted in that Kansai dialect of hers, it really felt like a proper retort, huh.

"Plus, thinkin' that roux always refers to curry roux is way too shallow. Considerin' the deep flavor of curry."[37]

"It's also wrong to be fixated so much on curry… Wait, huh? Then, that scenery behind you isn't just a background image? It's actually Eastern Europe? Then, that castle in the distance is actually Bran Castle…?"

"Yep, yep. You sure know your stuff."

Of course I would.

It was the model for the castle of the famed vampire Dracula, after all.

Now that I looked carefully, I could see that the scenery displayed on the screen was actually moving in accordance with the angle of the camera—not a narrative trick, but a remote conference trick. It wasn't a background, but her actually being on the ground, on the field.

Romania.

Okay, but why was she even so far away…? It would almost feel more natural if she were still at the North Pole, but why in the world was Kagenui-san already in Europe, which we had set as our destination?

Was she there to get in our way?

But there had to be a limit to how far she could forestall us.

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[36] In Japanese, Romania is written as ルーマニア *ruumania*, which can be parsed as "roux mania" (roux being an important component of Japanese curry).

[37] She says 甘い *amai* here, meaning "naive" in context, but literally meaning "sweet". She then alludes to the sweet flavor of Japanese curry.

It would surpass Gaen-san's omniscience and Oshino's perceptiveness—I'd already considered her a terrifying person, but was she *this* terrifying?

Was she actually Aikawa Jun?

No, for humanity's strongest, that episode ended up published only just after the declaration of emergency, so her outrageous and chaotic contract work was performed in a Venice before Corona, you know? Amazing how these differences could arise, even in the midst of a disaster that affected everyone in the world equally. But it wasn't the time to be surprised at my good timing—as is often said, first come, first served. For now, I followed up with my next remark.

"...In your case, Kagenui-san, you're probably not there for sightseeing."

"It's a business trip."

What a normal-sounding reason.

Though I couldn't just accept it normally.

"But don't get the wrong idea. When I came here, there weren't any travel restrictions yet. And then suddenly countries started to close down one by one, so now I'm in a bit of a spot since I can't go home. My movement's already limited even in regular times, so with things like this, I gotta say, it felt a lot more free at the North Pole."

"Uh-huh..."

When she put it like that, it could be counted as one of those things that were happening all the time in today's world, but even if she made it sound like she'd left the country following the proper procedures... For Kagenui-san, the word "business" referred to the extermination of immortal oddities.

It felt like the conversation was leading in an unpleasant direction.

The worst-case scenario popped up in my mind.

It was unsettling... Basically, what if Shinobu's hunch of "something happened to my sworn friend" meant that that sworn friend, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster, had been exterminated at the hands of Kagenui-san?

With her having lived too long a life, and with the times having changed, Suicidemaster may no longer have needed to be exterminated, but in the end, whether or not to turn a blind eye was up to Kagenui-san's, as well as Gaen-san's, discretion.

It was flexible, and yet, it was inflexible.

Perhaps the reason she took the opportunity to casually invite Shinobu and I to Europe after being much obliged to receive our call with good timing was, in fact, to confirm the identity of the body... Perhaps Suicidemaster had become so beaten up that only her sworn friend, Shinobu, would be capable of identifying her.

For Kagenui-san to invite us first, you could say it was quite literally a lifeboat[38], but it was as though that boat had already been wrecked.

As though my silence was of no concern to her, Kagenui-san said,

"But it's been rough goin', and I dunno what the world is gonna be like goin' forward. So, well, I figured I was still owed something from you, Araragi-kun, so I'd like for you to lend me a hand,"

continuing the conversation.

Huh? Was there still something I owed to this person?

Oh, there was... She'd saved the life of my sisters once or twice, and she'd been someone I could rely on when I couldn't turn back after becoming a vampire.

She'd also trained me in hand-to-hand combat on the grounds of the Kitashirahebi Shrine, hadn't she... Honestly, unlike Oshino, she didn't really give off the feeling of being one of my benefactors.

However, she'd said it was rough going. Not a shipwreck.[39]

In other words, even if the purpose of Kagenui-san's voyage was the extermination of Suicidemaster, it at least meant that she hadn't managed to accomplish that just yet—thus, there was still time to fulfill Shinobu's desire to save her sworn friend from crisis.

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[38] 渡りに船 *watarinifune*. The figurative meaning is "godsend" or "timely offer", but it literally means "a boat for crossing". I preserved the literal meaning in the translation for Koyomi's extended metaphor.

[39] 難航 *nankou* "rough going", 難破 *nanpa* "shipwreck".

Or was there… No, there still was.

I was going to believe that there still was.

Did that mean that, the way things would go from here on out was that we would accept Kagenui-san's invitation to go to Europe, but we would interfere with her work afterwards? This had become something completely different from what I'd been expecting.

Even if she didn't feel like a benefactor, this was on the level of returning her favor with spite.

I never thought I'd realize how true that archaic viewpoint was, about how remote calls couldn't properly convey minor nuances and feelings… If this had been a face-to-face conversation, there would have been a good chance that I would already have taken a good beating from Kagenui-san, for no reason at all.

Though I'd prefer that she had a reason for it.

Since the plan had already been killed, I wanted to officially state my plan for the record without prior context, but my original plan had been as follows: since it wouldn't be simple to directly obtain permission for a trip to Europe from Gaen-san, or rather, since there would be overwhelming resistance to the idea the moment we applied, I figured I could (vaguely) go through Gaen-san's direct junior, Kagenui-san. I thought it had been pretty logical, but now I realized that it was a plan riddled with holes, not to mention small-minded.

I was trying to avoid the Three Closes, but I didn't realize I'd avoided "close examination" as well.[40]

To be honest, I'd even entertained the possibility that Kagenui-san might find it bothersome and arbitrarily give me permission herself—but, I never thought that, instead of permission, she'd invite me there herself.

It was a brilliant request.

Though it was something that made me worry.

Whether or not I should just go along with the flow.

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[40] 綿密 *menmitsu* "detailed, scrupulous". Containing 密 *mitsu* from the aforementioned 三密 *san mitsu* "Three Closes".

It felt like that flow would become quite the stormy seas, but if I allowed the conversation to proceed smoothly without trying to wrap things up myself, I would probably be able to secure the second goal of a "means of transportation", killing two birds with one stone.

Though the smoothness of the conversation was like a rapidly accelerating conveyor belt headed straight for hell... Sheesh, how many more times would I need to fall to hell before I'd be satisfied?

I'd never heard of a repeat customer to hell.

Rather than "Roux-mania", maybe it was like "Hot-springs-mania"?

"All right. I had more time on my hands than I knew what to do with, and I would be honored to be given the opportunity to assist you, Kagenui-san. And learn from you, as well. Ah, but, what a shame! I don't have enough funds on hand to pay for the travel expenses..."

"Aah, yeah. Not like part-timers are gettin' a lot of shifts these days. And tuition has gotten pretty ridiculous, hasn't it?"

She was being understanding, but I'd never taken up a job in the first place. My tuition had been paid in full by my parents, and unlike Oikura, I hadn't applied for any scholarships... So I hadn't experienced any pain or bitterness on that front.

Speaking of which, unlike Oshino and Kaiki, Kagenui-san had actually graduated from university, hadn't she... I really had to wonder what kind of student she was.

I could hardly imagine it.

"And, Araragi-kun, it ain't like you got diplomatic privileges like me."

"Kagenui-san, you have diplomatic privileges!?"

Why!?

Isn't she the worst person to be given those!?

"It's fine, it's fine. Well then, I'll dispatch Yotsugi over to where you are, so have her give you a ride. To tell you the truth, that's how I got here, too."

Got all the way to Europe without any jet lag, said Kagenui-san—I'd be incurring damage to my mind and body on a level that far surpassed mere jet lag, but, well, that was more or less the clincher behind my video call with Kagenui-san.

I'd briefly alluded to the idea that, when Shinobu and Suicidemaster came over to Japan, they did so via a mighty leap (daring to disregard the rule that vampires couldn't cross flowing water), so Ononoki-chan, the power-type character who was Kagenui-san's shikigami and a former freeloader in the Araragi home, should be capable of the same thing.

The move specialized in transportation, "Unlimited Rulebook"... It had helped Shinobu and I countless times previously.

Though those times were for domestic travel... I'd only been assuming that, if that *shikigami* tween girl were to get serious, she'd be able to leap to the other side of the Earth, but it seemed my assumption was right on the money.

"Of course, that kid ain't the King of Oddities, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire in her heyday, so reachin' Europe in a single go with 'Unlimited Rulebook' just ain't possible. You'll have to take multiple layovers across the Eurasian continent."

Seemed like fantasy clashed with reality in a weird way.

Multiple layovers, huh...

"Huh...? If you're 'dispatching' her, then does that mean Ononoki-chan is currently working together with you, Kagenui-san?"

"Of course. She's my *shikigami*, so ain't that only natural?"

I was thinking there'd been quite a long period of time where it wasn't, in fact, natural... Not just about when she was freeloading in the Araragi home, but also when she'd been working as Sengoku's partner.

"Hm? If it's about Nadeko-chan, I've already had Yotsugi pull out from there."

Hey, hey.

Your information isn't up-to-date, Tsukihi-chan.

"Since I had ties with her, too, I was kinda waverin' between whether I should ask you or Nadeko-chan for help. So your call was good timing. Yotsugi's gonna be disappointed, though."

So she'll feel disappointment... That it's me and not Sengoku. But really, I also had to recognize that I'd made this call with incredibly good timing.

This was like the only part of me that was actually worth anything.

It probably wasn't enough to serve as my atonement, but it was probably better for me to bear the burden of helping Kagenui-san over Sengoku... But anyway, so that's what happened. I'd heard that, after leaving the Araragi home, she'd gone to stay with Sengoku, but apparently Ononoki-chan had withdrawn from there, too.

As Kagenui-san had said, it would be as though she'd returned to her primary role of being the *shikigami* of an *onmyouji*—as for me, I would simply look forward to celebrating our reunion.

If the situation was leisurely enough for that.

"Incidentally, may I ask for the reason Ononoki-chan was pulled out from where Sengoku was?"

"Huh, you curious?"

"Well, yes... Considering the circumstances behind her getting fired from her job of monitoring me."

I couldn't help but worry that she'd messed something up again. It could just be a needless concern, and I certainly didn't want to increase the number of my concerns in this situation (not a superfluous concern, but a Yotsugi concern[41]). Having said that, it would be quite courageous of me to board a plane that was known to have flaws.

Ononoki-chan could be pretty clumsy about these things, after all.

"But I dunno all that much myself. You should go and ask her 'bout it. I'll have Yotsugi explain what kind of work I want you to do, too. Lessee, I think she'll be arriving in Japan in about two hours."

"I see. That's a lot longer than I was thinking."

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[41] 余計 *yokei* "superfluous", 余接 "Yotsugi".

For a Europe–Japan trip that would normally take over ten hours via airplane, it was actually on the faster side. But thinking of it as a shortcut made via mighty leaps, even knowing that it consisted of multiple layovers, it felt like it was more of a congested pace than I had anticipated.

Did it even make sense to use "congested" for airways?[42]

It was hard to believe that she was the type to take her time getting ready. There had to be another reason for it.

"It's because for each layover, she needs to pick out a safety zone with zero cases of the novel coronavirus. As a corpse doll, Yotsugi herself can't get infected, but it wouldn't be funny if she carried the virus into Japan, right? Especially for you, Araragi-kun, since you seem like you'd get into close contact with her."

"Well, I can't say that I won't."

"Say that much, at least!"

Her threatening voice gave me a bit of a scare.

I take back what I said earlier. She was terrifying even over the phone.

This wasn't just peer pressure. This was just pressure.

You could even say it was violence.

After all, she *was* the violent *onmyouji*.

However, this was not just a facetious exchange. If I needed to patronize ONK Airlines, then even if I were a respectable young man, I would have no choice but to wrap my arms around her body.

It wasn't time for morality to shine here.

It was my time to shine.

"Both you and Shinobu-chan should make sure that you avoid 'infecting and being infected', too. You aren't diplomats like I am, so it would be a big problem if you ended up unable to return, y'know?"

Even in times like these, it's a good idea to see things through and graduate from the university you worked so hard to get into—said

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[42] The term used here is 徐行 *jokou* "slow-moving", which is usually used to describe cars or trains.

Kagenui-san, likely recalling her two colleagues that had dropped out. And, either due to a problem with the signal or because she'd finished saying everything she needed to say, the video call was forcibly—that is to say, violently—terminated.

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I did not find myself immersed in the feeling of having completed a difficult task.

Before Ononoki-chan crashed in on us, I first needed to meet back up with Shinobu... With Kagenui-san having placed emphasis on taking countermeasures against infection, it was about time for me to hear from her about them, now that the plan had made it this far.

Especially if we were to cooperate with Kagenui-san and Ononoki-chan, who'd been there for longer... I'd heard that the infection status of the various countries in Europe were far different from that of Japan, so we couldn't just be slapdash about it.

And there was the possibility that, in order to get things moving, she'd simply lied about having a plan—if so, I needed to make that transparently clear.

"How rude. 'Twas certainly not a lie that I had a plan—but at that point in time, I couldn't have foreseen that you would go and seek help from that Kagenui.[43] Perhaps my plan will need some fine-tuning."

Appearing from my shadow for the second time, Shinobu pompously crossed her arms—as expected, she wasn't pleased with the fact that I'd made contact with that specialist in immortal oddities without having consulted her first.

For someone who says that all humans are the same to her, that girl could be pretty extreme in her likes and dislikes.

How difficult she was.

"It was a surprise for me, too. I never thought Kagenui-san would be working in Europe in this situation—but don't you think it could be connected to that 'just because' feeling you were having?"

Since I had some concerns, I figured it was better to share them with Shinobu now. It would be a pain if things got complicated over there because I stayed silent.

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[43] Instead of using the *kanji* 影縫 for Kagenui, Shinobu refers to her using the katakana カゲヌイ. It suggests that she's using the name in a somewhat affected manner.

"Hmm. And by that, you mean?"

Why weren't you getting it?

You should be able to figure it out from that.

"I'm just saying, how do you feel about the possibility that, at your birthplace or somewhere nearby, Kagenui-san exterminated, or is in the process of exterminating, Suicidemaster? The timing just seems too good to be a coincidence."

I couldn't afford to have things go to waste by clumsily pressing the matter, so I didn't really ask about it during the call, but apparently, there had been some sort of connection between Suicidemaster and Kagenui-san even before the events of one year ago.

They'd exchanged words that sounded so very meaningful.

"If helping Suicidemaster means having to oppose Kagenui-san and Ononoki-chan, then that makes things more complicated. It would be like going back to that summer break two years ago..."

Those were summer memories that I didn't want to recall.

It was perhaps the time I'd been the closest to dying.

And there was no way that I could say that I'd won that battle.

"Since the source is my own intuition, I cannot outright deny it, but, about that, well... Would it not be all right?"

After thinking about it briefly, Shinobu said as such.

Did she really think about it? If she was even thinking, was she actually thinking about toroidal baked goods, instead?

She was always making careless promises, again and again.

Or so I thought, but it seemed that this time, it wasn't necessarily a careless promise, nor did it seem to be entirely baseless, as the golden-haired young girl continued thusly.

"After all, she is a vampire that will die for more times than you can count. And that has always been the case, so simply being exterminated by a vampire hunter in a proper, or ordinary, manner should not spark my intuition. I suspect she has gotten involved in matters even more unavoidable."

Something was happening that was worse than dying?

She'd been saying something of the sort from the beginning, but it made even more sense if Kagenui-san was somehow involved.

They say that speaking from personal experience carried its own level of persuasiveness, and if so, Kagenui-san describing her visit to Europe as a "business trip" could have a different implication—in the first place, a specialist in immortal oddities like her asking someone like me or Shinobu for help was quite the abnormal situation in itself.

It was neither proper nor ordinary.

What exactly was happening in Europe—in what remained of the Acerola Kingdom (temp.)?

"...Well, Kagenui-san is someone that employs an immortal oddity in Ononoki-chan as her *shikigami*, so there's no point in thinking too hard about it."

There was no need to obsess over the setup.

I'd learned from the pandemic that thinking too hard or worrying too much wasn't exactly a good thing.

Considering that she'd been thinking about calling up Sengoku, even though Ononoki-chan had already been ordered to withdraw, it could just be that, because of the infection control measures, there was a limit to what kind of people she could reach out to.

In times like these, it was true that it was harder for those belonging to organizations to mobilize.

"Indeed, in the case of that snake girl, she did seem to possess immunities to various poisons. Though I do not know if that remains true."

"Looks like we've returned to the topic at hand, though. Let's assume 'not getting infected' is easy enough, but what are we going to do about 'not infecting anyone', Shinobu? What did you mean when you said you might need to do some fine-tuning?"

"Well, going back to the summer break of two years ago, the reason that Kagenui decided to turn a blind eye to us was because you and I had lost nearly all of our vampiric power, thus making us no longer targets for extermination, correct?"

Right.

To add to that, the one who went through the process to get us recognized as harmless was none other than Oshino—that discerning guy had gone and ensured our safety in advance.

To go even further, it was that con man that had called Kagenui-san into this town in the first place. Because I'd gotten in the way of his get-rich-quick scheme, he'd put me through some awful harassment.

What a trio they made.

Maybe they gave off the same impression as me and Oikura and Hitagi.

"In fact, she'd made it abundantly clear when we met again that winter. If my physical transformation into a vampire progressed any more from that point, she would exterminate me with no mercy."

"And *that* is exactly what I plan to do."

"What?"

I had simply been reminiscing about the past, but Shinobu pointed towards what I said as though I was dead-on.

"With what remains of our vampire constitutions, there's no chance of us being infected, so if we were to power up that constitution by a tiny bit, spreading the infection would become impossible, too. That is my plan. Or was."

"Mm—would it even work that way?"

It didn't immediately click for me.

If turning into a vampire was like becoming more like a bat, then I would think it would make us *more* susceptible to infection—like how they would say cats could catch the virus, though this had nothing to do with Hanekawa.

I couldn't simply pass the halfhearted judgment of a layperson.

No, in the first place, it wasn't like it was impossible for us to get infected. The kind of immortality I had was one that simply maintained a healthy body, so it only meant that it was unlikely for me to show symptoms if I were to get infected—like being able to quickly recover if I

sustained a fatal injury. Basically, if we boosted my immortal nature, my vampiric nature, even further, was she thinking that I wouldn't just be able to negate the effect of the virus, but eradicate it completely?

That would be almost like a vaccine.

"If that were possible, it would be better for us to proactively go outdoors and gradually clean the atmosphere of the virus. Like an air purifier."

Or like Amabie-sama.

Perhaps we should have pictures of ourselves drawn, too.

"Back in my heyday, that may very well have been possible for me—loathed as the King of Oddities as I was. But of course, were we to go that far, it would simply revert us into becoming targets for extermination."

I have no need for living life on the run, said Shinobu, shaking her head.

Just as it was for me, it seemed that "hellish spring break" was a bitter recollection for Shinobu as well.

Becoming a young girl for eternity would be bitter for anyone.

"According to what I learned from Meniko, viruses aren't capable of self-reproducing, so they aren't classified as 'living beings' under the modern definition... But would it be like using an energy drain on the viruses themselves?"

"It seems your knowledge consists solely of what you have learned from women and children. That in itself could be called an energy drain—but, 'tis something like that. Not to mention, under the modern definition, vampires would not be considered living beings, either."

We would be monsters, she said.

Hmm... To be completely honest, it was hard to say that it sounded like a good idea... Perhaps that was why she'd acted so pretentious about it earlier. But it was as a result of repeatedly doping ourselves with that "vampirism" that I'd nearly been unable to return to being human that winter.

Though that depended on the definition of "human".

Could you really say that a being who concealed a young girl in his shadow was really human?

However, though it was an act I'd recklessly repeated for my own convenience, it was a different matter if I were to do it for Shinobu's sake.

I'd been holding back ever since I'd become a university student, but I doubted it would be a big problem to expend some of the gauge that had filled up so far.

If Kagenui-san weren't involved, that is...

Then yeah, the plan would need some fine-tuning. Or adjustment on a larger scale, or maybe even giving up on it entirely.

"If we show ourselves to her after turning into vampires, she'll kill us..."

There was no doubt she'd be astounded, berating us for being people who never learned... It would be even worse if she were to learn that I was the reason she'd been sent to the North Pole.

"But technically, she was the one to invite us, so... In the end, it was like she hardly even cared about the reason I called her."

It made her seem like more and more of a heavyweight.

Or just half-baked.

"Practically speaking, we do need to use a little bit of vampirism from our normal mode, or I wouldn't be able to survive clinging to Ononoki-chan's waist through her mighty leaps. With repeated flights, it would tear my body to shreds."

If it were Shinobu in her heyday mode, if it were Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, then she could make a direct flight to what remained of the Acerola Kingdom (temp.) in a single leap without any layovers. We couldn't allow vampirism to that extent, but if we didn't reinforce our bodies on some level, what would arrive on Romania's doorstep would be two battered corpses.

What a delivery that would be.

“Is there a possibility that Kagenui-san is calling us for something completely unrelated to Suicidemaster? If that’s the case, we would need to handle two separate matters when we go there.”

“‘Twould seem to me that you are dreaming too much… I do not believe that Deathy has gotten herself exterminated by that Kagenui, but with how things have developed, I do not think they are completely unrelated, either. We do not need inspiration for that much. We can simply ask that Ononoki girl about it.”

“That’s true—and by Deathy, you’re talking about Suicidemaster, right?”

They sure seemed close…

They really gave off the impression of being sworn friends.

“When I went up to my childhood friend Oikura and tried to call her ‘Dachi’ with the double meaning of Sodachi and *tomodachi*, meaning friend, all I got was the experience of feeling physical pain for the first time in a while…”

“Could it not be that she felt strong repulsion towards the latter meaning?”

“Hey, would it be fine if I called you ‘Kissy’ from now on?”

“I do not mind much myself, but it would remove my bindings. Do not forget that I am bound by the name of that Hawaiian-shirt brat.”

I wasn’t expecting for the one restricted by those bindings to warn me about them… Regardless, for Kissy, or rather, for Shinobu to suggest the act of doping via sucking blood, it meant that the situation really was urgent.

I couldn’t refuse.

I’d say no to dining together, but I couldn’t say no to this.

Even if it was inevitable for us to incur the wrath of Gaen-san… I’d been thinking about asking for forgiveness by going through her junior, Kagenui-san, but that might lead to even harsher lecturing. She might take on Kagenui-san’s share of the wrath, too.

This was the result of our evil scheme.

It would probably be a good idea to check with Ononoki-chan in advance to see if Kagenui-san's business trip occurred on Gaen-san's orders.

Thinking back to the events of last year, Kagenui-san didn't seem like the kind of loyal junior that would act as Gaen-san's hands and feet—but, against the "onee-san that knew everything", I wanted to keep this a secret if I could.

I'd take this secret to the grave.

Though it could be that keeping this a secret is what sends me to the grave.

"I feel guiltier about the act of going out itself rather than its potential to spread the infection, and maybe that just means I'm weak to peer pressure, but oh well."

"And, as I have said, 'tis not going out, but returning home."

She was really fixated on that, huh.

And, just then, the doorbell rang.

It seemed Ononoki-chan had arrived—when she was still a freeloader, she'd more often climb in through the window, so it was really a sign that times had changed.

Right now, Ononoki-chan was a guest.

However, the first time she rang the doorbell as a "guest" two years ago, it ended with the entrance of the Araragi home being completely destroyed, so I had better answer the door quickly.

Thank goodness Tsukihi's school had already reopened.

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Supposing I were to interlock with Ononoki-chan and fly to the Acerola Kingdom (temp.), then in the meantime, who would be the one to take care of my little sisters, with whom I had been entrusted? That problem had suddenly occurred to me, but I might as well tackle all these problems one at a time.

Even a thousand questions must start from the first question.

First, I had to let Ononoki-chan in.

"Hiya, it's been a while, *oni* onii-chan, or for short, *oni*i-chan. I'm a corpse, so there's no risk of infection for me, but just in case, let's practice social distancing. Don't you dare come even one millimeter closer from that spot."

From the front door, she immediately assumed a distance that would make anyone think she simply hated me, but her monotone voice was, of course, because she was a corpse doll—depending on the point of view, one could argue that because she was a corpse doll, that actually raised the chances of her spreading the infection (basically what zombies were; a zombie virus). Anyway, before entering, Ononoki-chan pulled out her own hand sanitizer from the millet-dumpling-like pouch that hung from her waist and sterilized her hands.

She certainly hadn't forgotten her manners.

Naturally, she was wearing a mask—though she was probably expressionless beneath it. In this respect, you could say that she was sticking to her character of a *shikigami* that was absolutely obedient to her master's orders.

There had been a point in time when Yotsugi-chan had been made to wear an open-backed dress thanks to one of my little sisters, but she had since reverted to her original fashion.

And the eyepatch that I'd heard about was no longer there.

Gaen-san must have returned the eyeball that had been taken away from her—as someone who wasn't unconnected to that incident, it was a bit of a relief to see.

There had often been times when my eyes had been gouged out, too, so a part of me could sympathize.

"We could set off right now, but some level of explanation is probably essential. An essential diffusion.[44] Is that geriatric inside your shadow right now?"

"She is, but don't use that wording."

She could come back out if you kept calling her that.

Like a cat with stranger anxiety, she'd gone and hid herself when someone came to visit—or not. As you may have guessed, the tween girl and the young girl were not on particularly good terms, so this had been a result of my thoughtfulness in order to prevent them from squabbling as soon as they met.

It was monstrous distancing.

Ultimately, I wouldn't be able to avoid them having to meet face-to-face, but I would have to stay alert to prevent lighting the spark of conflict until the very last moment—basically just putting off the problem for later. Along with that, for the sake of going through the proper procedures for step-by-step vampirism, I was having the young girl, who was ordinarily nocturnal, get some sleep. In vampire terms, it would be like her getting some rest in a casket... For Shinobu, who almost never abides by the rule of "always be prepared", to thoroughly commit herself to the idea that "resting is also one's responsibility"... It really made me see how much importance she was placing on that intuition of hers.

"Fine. I also want to avoid any pointless conflict."

As she said that, Ononoki-chan sat down in the entryway without even taking off her boots.

"Hm? You're not gonna come in? I can at least offer you some tea."

"That's fine. I'd like to avoid sitting at the same table without any partitions."

"I have some ice cream, too."

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[44] 必要普及 *hitsuyou fukyuu* "essential diffusion" is basically a made up phrase that puns on 不要不急 *fuyou fukyuu* "non-essential and non-urgent", a term that saw more use during the pandemic.

“—Th-that... is fine?”[45]

So which was it?

As “fine” was a word that could be taken either way, it made things more convoluted.

It was harder to read her intentions with her wearing a mask on top of always being expressionless, but Ononoki-chan seemed to have overcome the temptation of ice cream... What impressive mental fortitude.

I’d have to remember to buy her some as a souvenir.

It seemed not entering was also her consideration as a returnee (?) from overseas to avoid even the tiniest chance of scattering the novel coronavirus inside the house.

It was a level of conversation that made it hard for me to think that this was the same person that had once blasted the entrance of my home to smithereens.

Again and again, I was impressed by this *shikigami*.

I should probably go and put on a mask myself.

“Now, where should I begin? Onee-chan told me a bunch of stuff to pass on, and I have a lot of questions I’d like to ask myself, but we’re pressed for time. Because of the time difference with Europe, I’d like to adjust our departure time, too.”

Sheesh, onee-chan’s always pushing me around because of her lack of planning—said Ononoki-chan, speaking like someone from middle management.

Well, it would be pretty annoying to be forced to return home from Japan because of some reason that may have been thought up on the fly... And even more annoying, if it ended up twisting the future in which she could reunite with Sengoku.

Oh yeah, that’s right.

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[45] Yotsugi’s previous two usages of “fine” came from 結構 *kekkou*, which can mean “sufficient” and can be used to imply “no thank you”. In this line, she actually says 決行 *kekkou*, meaning “to carry out”, as though she was trying to refuse but her true feelings slipped through. I translated this as “fine” with the meaning of refusing as well as the meaning of positively responding to the suggestion of ice cream.

I wanted to ask about Sengoku before we got to the main topic.

"After you left my house, I heard you went to stay with Sengoku, but what happened after that? Kagenui-san told me that I should ask you."

"We don't have time for me to explain that, so if you'd like, read Volume 2."

Read Volume 2?

How matter-of-fact of her.

"I'm sure opinions will be divided on whether or not it was a good idea to include the pandemic into this tale. As long as the setting is based in reality, it could be a form of deception to depict the world as though the coronavirus didn't exist, but for those that are reading, they might feel melancholy at the thought that the pandemic has encroached upon their novels as well. It's natural to want to be free, not self-restrained, when enjoying reading. And to those types of readers, I recommend Volume 2."

"Don't get into a sales pitch."

What was this, *The Testimonial of Ononoki Yotsugi*?

Even if it's Volume 2, it takes place chronologically before this one, huh... Things were as complex as always.

Nevertheless, it wasn't like I didn't understand what Yotsugi meant.

If anything, I sympathized strongly.

"There were plenty of great works, like *The Betrothed* or *Death in Venice*, that included infectious diseases in their stories. So it's not necessarily a bad thing, in the sense that it gives us insight into history. If we don't leave behind evidence in real time, history might get buried. What is the best way to reconcile this? The line between reality and fantasy is getting increasingly blurred. Nade*kou* is about to have a hard time with that from now on, too."

"Huh? Why's Sengoku gonna have a hard time?"

"For details, read Volume 2."

She was completely passing the buck onto Volume 2.

What if it didn't end up being published at the same time?

If we were on this subject, then the publishing industry itself was in trouble, too. When I'd heard that bookstores in the city had closed down, it had come as a shock to me, even as someone who wasn't necessarily an avid reader. Should books be considered essential goods or not... The same could be said of music or sports, but it was a pretty difficult topic.

"If they weren't essential, they would never have been created in the first place, and they would have died out much earlier. At least, that's how I see it, as a man-made oddity. In fact, I would even evaluate it like this—in times like these, books are things that are so enjoyable, so irresistible, and so indispensable to the extent that it wouldn't be a surprise if they were banned. Artists and creators should be proud that they've created works so valuable, we are willing to risk our lives to appreciate them. Just from the topic of reading, it seems I got a bit carried away."[46]

This corpse doll was making some pretty good points.

In spite of her monotone.

And it was the same idea for music or sports, huh... They were forms of entertainment that people would gather in limitless numbers for, if limits weren't imposed on them. And if they weren't, in times like these they'd just be left alone, with people saying, "If it pleases them, then why not let them do as they please? It's not like it has a big influence on anything." And that wasn't really all that bad.

"And I want to give praise to myself as a fan, too, from the bottom of my heart. Aah, so the numerous forms of entertainment that have soothed my soul were, in fact, so entertaining that they would end up being regarded as dangerous by society!"

"Aren't your good points getting a little too exaggerated?"

Those words made *her* seem dangerous.

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[46] Yotsugi puns 本 *hon* "books" with 本気を出す *honki o dasu* "to get serious". I tried my best with "read" and "carried away".

Alas, it would be fairly gauche of me to doubt whether a corpse doll possessed a heart or soul.

"But really, when I think about the fact that a lot of old science fiction masterpieces give off the impression of containing mysteries from an era without cell phones, it makes me feel a bit ashamed. They never depicted a pandemic like this in their imaginary future worlds, did they?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if they actually did. Just that a stupid, shallow reader like you hasn't managed to read one yet. Don't underestimate the imagination of renowned classic authors. With science fiction novels having depicted cell phones, robots, and even the surveillance society to an almost prophetic level, I'm sure there's a clear depiction of this pandemic, too. What even the best science fiction writers failed to foresee was the foolishness of humanity's inability to band together, even in times like these."

"Shut up. I thought you were making some good points, but now this."

And you called me a stupid, shallow reader, too.

Though it was true I hadn't gone too deep in my reading.

"If humanity were to band together, it would only bring forth peer pressure. Fortunately, Volume 2 has no mention of the coronavirus or the foolishness of humanity and is simply a cheerful adventure tale, so you can read it without worry. It's just a cozy little story about a trip to Okinawa. Nade*kou* goes snorkeling in her school swimsuit, and plays around with Iriomote cats while wearing nothing but bloomers."

"Don't just spout out credible-sounding lies, even if you are a *tsukumogami*."[47]

That wasn't something you'd be able to publish in the Reiwa era.[48]

It seemed like Volume 1 really was going to be published on its own.

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[47] Koyomi uses 信憑性 *shinpyousei* "credibility", and follows up with 憑喪神 *tsukumogami*. Note that *tsukumogami* is usually written as 付喪神, but the first *kanji* is replaced with the older variant 憑 for the wordplay. (憑 also appears in the title 憑物語 *Tsukimonogatari*.)

[48] 令和 *Reiwa* is the name of the current era of Japan's official calendar (with respect to the publication date).

"Well, it's true that if I hype it up too much, there might be a flood of people starting from Volume 2, so I'll leave it at that. Especially because we're in quite the unacceptable situation where the Nadeko chapters of Monster Season were more popular."

"We were in that kind of situation?"

People will just stop reading here!

At least say something like, "Please enjoy both volumes together"!

It didn't seem like things were going to be so cheerful from here on out, either... No matter how our Suicidemaster-centered trip would be concluded, it was an unshakeable truth that I would end up incurring Gaen-san's wrath—in other words, a Lecture End.

"Maybe it isn't too late to change tracks and devote myself to playing around with a young girl and a tween girl..."

"That's also something you can't publish in the Reiwa era. But it's fine, both volumes will come out. It'll be a zero-sum game between Volumes 1 and 2."

In other words, *rei* (zero) and *wa* (sum).[49]

Well, it didn't sound like Ononoki-chan committed some mistake or blunder that led to her being dismissed from where Sengoku was, which meant I could ensure a certain amount of safety for the aircraft... In the first place, it was wrong to attempt to glean information about Sengoku from Ononoki-chan.

If I make it back alive, I'll go and read that Volume 2 of yours.

School swimsuits and wearing nothing but bloomers were probably not hyping things up so much as outright tall tales, but I could imagine even worse things had occurred.

"As for us, let's do our best to not extend this by another volume. So, Ononoki-chan. Let's get to the main topic. What does Kagenui-san want us to help her with? Calling us out to Europe, during these troubled times."

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[49] Koyomi puns 令和 *Reiwa* (see note 48) with 零和 *rei wa*, where 零 *rei* can mean "zero" and 和 *wa* can mean "sum".

I could only pray that we weren't going to confirm the dead body of a sworn friend.

But, as soon as I made such a prayer...

"Of course, it's oddity-related,"

responded Ononoki-chan immediately.

Not in a reading tone, but in her monotone.[50]

"In fact, it's vampire-related. Otherwise, even that lawless onee-chan wouldn't have brought on an amateur for an assistant."

It was as I expected, but when she confirmed it, I couldn't help but grow more and more afraid... Since I cut ties with Gaen-san, this would be the first time I was getting involved with oddity tales as part of a job.

"But it's a little awkward, since it's not like you two are completely unrelated, *oni*i-chan. Because it's a mutual acquaintance that's been affected by this—one that can't exactly be considered human."[51]

"...Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster?"

"Oh my, and why would you think that, *oni* onii-chan? I only said that it was a mutual acquaintance."

She was speaking like some great detective that had trapped a suspect using only her words, but really, with such blatant hints, anyone would be able to get it.

Even without Shinobu's level of intuition, it would click.

"Eh... Then are we really going to confirm the body? Are we really going to an autopsy room in Eastern Europe to see Suicidemaster's corpse, which was demolished by Kagenui-san to a point that you could trigger a dust explosion?"

"Your mental image of onee-chan is way too awful. Don't describe her like some sort of demolition equipment."

Well, it wasn't quite right, but it was pretty close, wasn't it?

I'd almost been demolished myself.

"It's me that should say to you, *oni* onii-chan, that you weren't quite right, but you were pretty close. Not quite a jungle crow, but a

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[50] 本読み *hon'yomi* "reading", 棒読み *bouyomi* "monotone".

[51] The word for "acquaintance" (知人 *chijin*) contains the *kanji* for "person" (人).

carrion crow.[52] We're not going to confirm the body, but depending on what happens, it could be something even more brutal. Since onee-chan is that kind of person, she didn't really dig too deep, but it did weigh on my mind why you so fearlessly set up a remote conference here."

Of course she would.

I didn't really get what she meant by jungle crows and carrion crows, but with this, she seemed less like middle management and more like the tech-savvy assistant to a pushy boss—when it came to power-type characters, Ononoki-chan wasn't much different from any other, but it seemed people could adapt based on the positions they were given.

Though she wasn't a person, but a *shikigami*.

"Well, y'know, sometimes I feel like reconnecting with old friends. Especially in times like these. I've learned how precious our bonds can be."

"As a result, you might end up reconnecting with a corpse."

After casually making that disturbing threat, she then said, "If you have any information about Suicidemaster, you'd better tell me everything while I'm still in enough of a good mood to smile."

Though she was expressionless under her mask.

Oops. It wasn't as though I had any information worth sharing—all I could mention was Shinobu's sixth sense. By awkwardly trying to keep things secret, I'd made myself even more suspicious—as I thought, honesty was the best policy.

I shouldn't have deviated from my principles.

"It wasn't exactly for the sake of reconnecting with old friends, but it's true that Shinobu felt some concern over Suicidemaster's present state. And that's why I called. Since I'm not currently in contact with Gaen-san, I went to Kagenui-san."

"Really? Is that all?"

I'd left some things out, but I wasn't telling that big of a lie—I just didn't think there was a need to disclose that, because Shinobu was

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[52] ハシブトガラス *hashibudo garasu* "jungle crow", ハシボソガラス *hashiboso garasu* "carrion crow".

plotting a daring trip overseas, I chose to call Kagenui-san in order to avoid being reprimanded by Gaen-san.

Honesty might be the best policy, but being thoughtful could be the second best.

"Yeah. Really, I'm the one that could use some information here. That's why I agreed to Kagenui-san's invitation."

Well, it was also because I'd learned that the burden would fall upon her secondary candidate, Sengoku, if I were to refuse... It seemed reasonable to assume that we were the primary candidates, as the matter was related to vampires.

"That's for sure. Like how for snake-related matters like Araundo Uroko, it was Nade*kou* that had the advantage."

"Snake-related?"

Araundo Uroko?

Was she still trying to promote Volume 2?

"All right, I understand. However, Nade*kou* is one thing, but personally, I'm not too keen on getting you involved, *oni* onii-chan. Onee-chan can be a bit halfhearted about these things, but as professionals, there are certain lines that should be drawn at the bare minimum."

"Well, apparently Gaen-san has given up on trying to pull me down that path."

"That may be true. I also think that you aren't suited to be a specialist, *oni* onii-chan. Because you put in too much of your own personal feelings. No matter who you're with, you'll sympathize with them, and no matter who you face, you'll try to see things from their point of view. But you won't be able to make correct judgments that way—you'll end up doing stuff like hoarding toilet paper."

"Actually, when it came to that debacle, I got a pretty late start on that."

Though it got me to learn a few things about supply chain logistics. I also learned that, even though it was half a century since the oil crisis, people still didn't change so easily.

“If what you learned was the unchanging nature of things, *oni* onii-chan, then what I experienced was the horror of baseless rumors. After witnessing in real time how ghost stories with no substance can form in such ways, I’m sure my professional mindset as a specialist is going to change.”

Indeed, being incapable of making the right choices even when knowing that something was misinformation sounded like a very oddity-like debacle. And it wasn’t just toilet paper—for the pandemic as a whole, I couldn’t deny that there was a part of it being magnified by baseless rumors.

It made me want to distrust others.

Even though I was supposed to have learned how precious my bonds were.

Being cautious was fine, but there was the risk of caution being a hotbed for conspiracy theories—perhaps half-belief and half-doubt was actually the best stance to take.

“But even so, in the end, I’m just onee-chan’s *shikigami*. It’s not like I have a professional license of my own. I have to abide by my master’s orders—and it just so happened that onee-chan’s haphazardness lined up with you declaring that you weren't afraid of the coronavirus.”

“When did I ever declare that I wasn’t afraid of the coronavirus?”

I was quivering with fear.

It might be hard for me to get infected, but at the same time, it implied that vaccines might be similarly ineffective.

“However, you’d better resolve yourself. For this job in particular, I don’t want you to come into it with superficial feelings.”

You’ll come to know about things that you were better off not knowing.

That was what Ononoki-chan said to make sure.

“You’re better off knowing that, in this world, there are things that you’re better off knowing and things you’re better off not knowing.”

By adding that final phrase, it made her speech sound a bit convoluted, but it sounded like Ononoki-chan was giving me the option to retreat. Perhaps she even thought that I had only agreed because I found it hard to reject Kagenui-san's coercive recruitment.

The corpse doll had a kind side to her.

Or perhaps, Ononoki-chan was looking back at the case that led to her being forced to leave this house—but in any case, my answer was already decided.

"It's all right, Ononoki-chan. I'm ready. And I'm also doing this in part to repay Shinobu. As thanks to her going along with my every whim for over two years."

And it was my atonement.

In that respect, I was always resolved.

"Oh, is that so."

Her reaction was too weak.

It was basically no reaction, in the face of my resolve.

"In that case, I'll also resolve myself and share with you this piece of top-secret info. For the record, there's no turning back after you hear this. What exactly onee-chan is doing in Europe—what exactly is happening in Europe."

"...Gulp."

I inhaled sharply.

Partly because of how Suicidemaster was involved in the matter, but also because that inconsiderate Kagenui-san sought me out for assistance... As someone who had borne witness to various hells, my morbid curiosity couldn't help but be stimulated.

Things I was better off not knowing.

What exactly did I not know?

I don't know everything, I just know what I know—Hanekawa's catchphrase came to mind as I waited for Ononoki-chan to continue. And in her usual monotone, but with an air of solemnity...

"Right now, there's a pandemic going on in Europe,"

she said.

She said. She said?

"……"

"You're so shocked that it's left you speechless, huh, *oni* onii-chan."

Well, I *was* speechless, but…

Now hold on. Did Ononoki-chan really see me as that much of an idiot? Didn't we just recently talk about the toilet paper debacle? Huh, did she just think that I was pretending to know?

"Ononoki-chan, are you perhaps concerned that an irresponsible youngster like me is not sufficiently aware of the threat of the coronavirus? Did you think that declaration wasn't for show, but for real?"

"Well, for youngsters who don't watch TV, we can use social media to spread the word."

"Those preconceptions scare me more."

"Isn't thinking that those are the preconceptions of an older person, in itself the preconceptions of a young person?"

"How philosophical of you. A step ahead in philosophy."[53]

She got me.

Personally, it wasn't so much that the threatening nature of the coronavirus wasn't coming across, but the truthfulness, or perhaps the gravity, of the situation. But now wasn't the time to be debating the difference in values across generations.

That was a different matter.

Right now, the fact that a pandemic was occurring was something that all of humanity throughout the whole world was aware of. For this, there was no doubt Hanekawa would say, "Everyone knows about that"—even Hanekawa, who could be anywhere in the world doing anything.

You didn't even know something like that?

It wouldn't be weird for that to be Hanekawa's reaction.

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[53] Koyomi combines 先達 *sendatsu* "leader, senior figure" with 達観 *takkan* "philosophical view" to make 先達観 (not a real word).

“That’s not it. *Oni* onii-chan, I’m not talking about the novel coronavirus.”

“Huh? Are you saying you want to use the global term, ‘COVID-19’?”

“I feel like you can combine that with ‘Seven Dwarfs’ to come up with something clever.[54] Both 7 and 19 are prime numbers, too.”

After saying that, Ononoki-chan continued, saying it had nothing to do with COVID-19, either.

“At this very moment, what’s sweeping the continent of Europe in the shadow of the coronavirus is a pandemic that only affects immortal oddities—vampires are dropping, one after another. At this rate, they’ll end up on the verge of extinction. And as for the one that the former Heartunderblade is concerned about, her sworn friend and the parent that brought her into this world, and, so to speak, the one responsible for her character setting—Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster has already tested positive.”

Positive.

It’s quite the ironic word for vampires who are weak to the sun,[55] *oni* onii-chan.

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[54] コビッド *kobiddo* “COVID”, こびと *kobito* “dwarfs”.

[55] 陽性 *yousei* “positive”, 太陽 *taiyou* “sun”.

In that respect, the term “corona” as an astronomical term would also certainly suggest a poor matchup for vampires—but if a situation like this was really happening in Europe, then I couldn’t disagree that Kagenui-san’s trip was entirely for business.

It was inevitable.

If anything, it would be illogical for her to have not gone on the trip.

Conversely speaking, if the only principle that allowed Shinobu and me to travel was because we were less susceptible to infection, then this was the moment it all came crashing down—our vampire constitutions ended up completely backfiring on us, didn’t they?

Though I suppose, it was just like always?

On top of backfiring, misfortunes never come singly.[56]

We were about to defenselessly dive headfirst into a cluster. Just like always.

But an infection that targeted vampires?

Some centuries ago, vampires were thought to be the culprits behind an infectious disease, so it seemed completely backwards for them to become the victims of one now—however, it was true that the idea lined up perfectly with Shinobu’s intuition.

The gourmet vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster, who was an expert in dying... Shinobu’s hunch that something worse than death was happening for her turned out to be exactly right.

But... Was there really something like that?

For a pandemic to be occurring throughout the vampire world at the same time as the spread of the novel coronavirus—could the vector have been bats? Or maybe wolves?

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[56] 裏目 *urame* “back” (as in “backfire”), punned with 弱り目に祟り目 *yowari-me ni tatari-me*, a figure of speech that often gets translated as “misfortunes never come singly”. The wordplay comes from the repetition of 目 *me*.

When it came to the novel coronavirus, I thought I'd managed to fully empathize with those that were at the highest risk, but now that I was placed in that high-risk position, it made me realize that I hadn't understood their feelings at all.

Ultimately, I had been speaking from within my own safety bubble.

I hadn't had enough of a sense of danger.

What the older people had said had all been correct.

I'd shown off so much, acting as though I couldn't lose to the coronavirus... How embarrassing it all was. I was filled with regret.

"For now, the only ones showing symptoms are vampires. Vampires, as well as their thralls. Technically, I myself fall under the broad umbrella of immortal oddities, but at the moment I don't need to fear getting infected—but then again, that's not for certain. We're calling it a pandemic, but we still don't know what the cause is."

Other than the fact that the starting point is somewhere around what the former Heartunderblade calls the Acerola Kingdom (temp.)—said Ononoki-chan.

"Since there are in fact a broad spectrum of immortal oddities, *oni* onii-chan, you should keep in mind that even your family members could be at risk."

"....."

"Well, I'm glad that my concerns have been fully conveyed. That was the most important thing. It couldn't make me happier. *Oni* onii-chan, you said some admirable things like this being repayment or atonement for the former Heartunderblade, but you won't be able to get involved in this incident with the outlook of a third party. You're a completely related party, *oni* onii-chan, and you'll have to come into this carrying a high risk."

So her layovers avoiding infected areas, the hand sanitizer and mask, and the fact that she didn't come in any further than the entryway—Ononoki-chan's hygiene habits were actually rooted in the job she was working on.

Dear me.

Though there were no such indications as of right now, it wasn't at all true that Ononoki-chan and Kagenui-san were safe, either—we couldn't assume that the pandemic wouldn't spread to corpse dolls, or even humans.

"That's right... If Amabie-sama really exists, then it wouldn't be weird at all if there's an oddity that's like the plague itself."

"Since onee-chan's attention to risk management is nonexistent, I'll take independent action here and allow you to confer with the former Heartunderblade. I'll need time to replenish my energy for the next leap, so I'll be waiting here for about an hour."

It was right after I'd so boldly declared how prepared I was, but I was grateful for her consideration. You could even say that the circumstances had changed drastically for Shinobu, too... We were both carrying a high risk, but I considered it to be a more dangerous position for Shinobu.

For the sake of traveling while clinging to Ononoki-chan as she used "Unlimited Rulebook", we'd talked about how we would boost ourselves via vampirism, but after all this, it sounded so dangerous that it made me dizzy.

How terrifying.

This two-man cell was really just a couple of fools.

"At least let me treat you. Do you want me to get you some ice cream? You'd be fine with just eating by yourself in the entryway, right?"

"Yes, please. I'll take off the lid myself. Even if you finish your discussion quickly, I can't let you see me without my mask on."

She was saying something that sounded like a different *yokai* or a different urban legend had gotten mixed in, but there was no need to worry, for this surely wouldn't be a simple discussion... After washing my hands with soap while singing the ABCs, I retrieved some ice cream from the kitchen freezer and passed it to Ononoki-chan before withdrawing to my room on the second floor—and I knocked on my shadow.

“What is it? Have you finished talking? Ka ka, you’ve done a good job.”

Rubbing her drowsy eyes, the golden-haired young girl climbed out—how carefree she still was.

It put me at ease, just for a little.

“Now, is it time to implement my nice idea? After hearing how perfect my infection control measures are, I’m sure that corpse girl was trembling in awe, being Ononoki and all.”[57]

“Well, where should I start…”

Though it’s kind of late to pun on Ononoki with “trembling” after all this time.

“To get straight to the point, apparently Suicidemaster is still alive.”

“Oho! ‘Tis actually a surprise. Even though that gourmet’s life of over a thousand years has likely spent more time dead.”

If I’m a vampire with suicidal tendencies, then Deathy is a vampire with malnutrition—was what Shinobu declared, but the words “suicidal tendencies” ended up weighing on me for the first time in two years.

I thought I would be squashed flat by those words.

Without finding a better way to put it, I borrowed Ononoki-chan’s monotone for the rest.

“However, it seems she’s been infected.”

“Whaaat?”

“Not by the novel coronavirus, but by a disease that only affects vampires… Apparently, in Europe, vampires are dying one after another.”

There was Dramaturgy, the vampire hunter who was a vampire himself, who had once worked together with Hanekawa for a period of time… And there was the half-vampire, Episode… Where were they and what were they doing right now? I’d ended up with more people to worry about.

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[57] おののく *ononoku* means “to tremble”, punning with the name Ononoki.

It was a bit of a ridiculous circumstance that I would end up worrying about those two, though.

Simply just a weird twist of fate.

Ononoki-chan had highlighted that it was a crisis regarding the mass death of vampires, but in the first place, how many vampires even existed in the modern world, where science was at its peak?

Without even needing to use Shishirui Seishirou as an example, vampires lived fairly short lives relative to their long lifespans, and there was no doubt that they were already on the verge of extinction... That's why they were being put in an even worse spot.

As one would be able to tell from the model for Dracula's castle coming from Romania, vampires were originally European oddities, so it made sense to me why the infection was springing up there. However, that didn't mean that it wasn't capable of spreading into Japan, either.

As long as tales of vampires were passed down, so too were tales of killing vampires.

"Just as you thought, those ripples are spreading out with the Acerola Kingdom (temp.) at its center... So you weren't mistaken when you felt like you had to return to your home country for the sake of your sworn friend. However, don't you think it's gotten harder to tell whether or not returning to your home country will actually be of any help to Suicidemaster?"

"Panaino!"

"It's not the time for a 'Panaino'!"

As though she understood that it wasn't time for a "Panaino" without needing my retort, Shinobu crouched down on the spot to conceal her face... This golden-haired loli slave could have some violent mood swings.

She was getting depressed so blatantly?

Even curling up into a ball?

I hate to say this, but even I put up a braver front against Ononoki-chan. It was certainly unexpected for me, but I at least pretended that I had resolved myself.

I didn't want to forcibly pull Shinobu out of her crouching state, but I still pulled on ahead, passing on the extent that I'd heard from Shinobu—it ended up sounding like secondhand information, but I think I managed to hit all the important points.

It's a well-known fact that, if you contract the novel coronavirus, there's the severe problem that you won't be able to see your family members face-to-face. In the worst-case scenario, you won't be able to say your last farewells. And here, that sort of anxiety was not something we could detach ourselves from. It stood in the way as a problem that specifically affected us.

It was dangerous enough heading straight for the center of the pandemic, but it wasn't hard to imagine that visiting Suicidemaster, who had tested positive, would not be a particularly recommended course of action.

And her sworn friend surely would not to spread the infection onto Shinobu—

"There are a lot of things that are still unclear, and it's not like Ononoki-chan can give us all the details while we still haven't made a formal agreement, but as far as I can tell, this isn't a job that amateurs like us can carelessly poke our noses into. Wouldn't the adult decision be to leave this to the pros?"

The adult decision.

It was laughable for me to say those words.

Having turned twenty years old—though the age of majority was going to drop to eighteen soon.

Shinobu, with her face still buried in her lap, said,

"Aah. Aah. I never wanted to hear it. I never wanted the words 'the adult decision' to come out of your mouth. I guess my master is done for, too."

We should have ended things after *Kizumonogatari*, she continued, smacking the sides of her head in an "I didn't want to hear that" reaction—but, *Kizumonogatari*?

That was pretty far back, wasn't it.

And it was my ears that were burning, all right?

But, well, during that hellish spring break, there was no doubt that I hadn't made the slightest bit of an adult decision when I recklessly saved the life of a vampire—and the result of my recklessness would be a frontal wound that remained with me for life.[58]

Though, to be precise, it wasn't a frontal wound, but a bite mark on the back of my neck.

"As you are now, I'm sure you would not find it hard to abandon me if you were to come across me on the verge of death. Sob sob."

"Appealing to emotion is unfair!"

And you were way too bad at pretending to cry.

What's with the "Sob sob"?

"I learned a lot from that spring break, and I'm sure you did, too. And from when we destroyed a parallel world and stuff."

"You sure do seem to enjoy casually bringing up my past traumas, do you not?"

My mind briefly wandered to the meaningless question of what could have happened to Suicidemaster and the other vampires in that world line, but right now, I had better things to worry about.

It wasn't the time to make adjustments to the narrative for my own convenience.

Instead of making adjustments, I had to adjust my aim towards the issue at hand.

Though she was still assuming a sulking position, it didn't seem like Shinobu failed to understand... If she didn't understand, she could have foolishly jumped straight at the cluster, but the situation made our options seem closed off from all sides.

"I don't suppose we can try to set up a video call with Suicidemaster... A lot of details may still be unclear on that side, but from the way they spoke, it sounded like Kagenui-san is capable of getting into contact with Suicidemaster..."

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[58] 向こう見ず *mukou mizu* "recklessness", 向こう傷 *mukou kizu* "frontal wound".

Now, I didn't get the chance to ask, but what stance was Kagenui-san taking for this business trip? It really depended on the situation, but fundamentally, her position was that of one who "exterminated immortal oddities"... An ally of justice that treated "oddities that didn't die", which defied logic, as evil.

If there was a disease that was wiping out vampires, was it possible she actually wanted that? If so, there could be a possibility that she wanted to make the pandemic grow for the sake of exterminating vampires—or not.

That was a manifestation of a pipe dream no different from the idea that the global spread of the novel coronavirus would act as a wake-up call to the conceited humanity.

If it were Gaen-san and not Kagenui-san, then I could believe that she would take such a conniving, roundabout method, but that violent *onmyouji* would want to wipe out vampires not with an invisible phantom virus, but with her punches and headbutts and kicks.

Her stance was completely different.

"'Tis a certain sort of mutually advantageous relationship between hunters and vampires, you see. If vampires were to be wiped out, then so would the vampire hunters."

"That's a pretty large-scale thing to say..."

But, well, it was true.

In that sense, when it came to viruses that were incapable of self-reproducing, their hosts dying out would lead to the viruses themselves dying out—but it wasn't like the viruses would step on the brakes to prevent their hosts from dying out, which was the problem.

They would simply all die out when the time came.

All living things will go extinct someday.

Probabilistically.

Whether they're dinosaurs or viruses, whether they're humans or vampires—considering humans were wantonly destroying the environment of their own volition, there was no way they could operate with self-restraint when up against viruses.

“Even a vampire hunter would be troubled if they were to lose their job in a recession like this. ‘Tis not like you can find a proper job at this stage.”

They say that all legitimate trades are equally honorable, but it really was hard for me to imagine Kagenui-san being employed at a company or Kagenui-san starting her own business.

After all, it wasn’t like she could plant her feet on the ground.

“Then, should we assume that Kagenui-san has Suicidemaster under her custody? If so—”

That’s a relief, was something that was hard for me to say.

There was no way for me to know what the medical system was like for vampires... Suicidemaster may have been under constant surveillance from Gaen-san and her team ever since last spring, but the fact that her safety couldn’t be ensured even in those circumstances really made it clear how frightening a pandemic could be.

Shit, there were too many large things that I wouldn’t understand unless we went there ourselves... Even if Suicidemaster had been the one to turn Shinobu into a vampire, there was no master-servant relationship between them, so it wasn’t like telepathy was possible. There was nothing she could rely on but her own intuition.

Not that Shinobu and I had ever used telepathy between us, even if we were linked. Though there was the fact that our senses were shared, which you could say was a form of sympathy—sympathy, huh?

“The fact that our linkage stops at sympathy could have been the consideration of that Hawaiian-shirt brat, who wanted to avoid your inner thoughts being leaked to a young girl.”

“Then I have to admit, that consideration was an appropriate precaution.”

“Do not admit that. Why should ratings come into play between master and servant?”

“So, what should we do?”

Once again, I asked to confirm Shinobu’s intentions.

We couldn't keep Ononoki-chan waiting in the entryway forever—she was a corpse doll, not a ceramic *tanuki* from Shigaraki.

If anything, she was more like a bear with a salmon in its mouth.[59]

"If Suicidemaster is to you in the same way that Hanekawa is to me, then I can try thinking about it with Hanekawa in her position. If Hanekawa were overseas, having contracted a disease with a fatality rate and complication risks worse than those of the novel coronavirus, then as for what I would do—"

I'd come up with the analogy to say that I wouldn't go, that I'd stay put, that I'd pray for her recovery from a faraway location... But when I actually put myself in that situation, I was at a loss for words.

Because I thought that I might actually go.

There was a chance I wouldn't even hesitate.

I really hadn't become an adult, huh.

It was because of these kinds of impulses that humans went flower-viewing, after all.

"I understand. You need not continue with what you were saying, my master."

Finally, Shinobu raised her head.

I'd been wondering whether or not she'd actually been crying for real, but those golden eyes seemed to sparkle, overflowing with determination.

Determination.

In other words, while that young girl had been crouched, it was clear that she had come to some sort of decision—if so, then all I could do was respect that. As always.

Would we head for the ruined Acerola Kingdom (temp.)?

Or would we remain in closed-off Japan?

Either way, just as I had done as her servant in the past, I would abide by her decision and stick together with her—however, the conclusion that the golden-haired young girl came up with was neither of the two options.

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[59] A reference to *kibori kuma* from Hokkaido.

No, it was both.

“Let us do this. I am sorry to have to say this after inviting you, but you should stay here. I will go by myself to the Acerola Kingdom (temp.). What do you think?”

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Of course, I rejected her idea, and it was decided that I would be going with her to Europe. It finally felt like we'd taken a step forward in the conversation. Well, it was really my bad—it was almost cowardly of me to have Shinobu decide on everything while talking about how we were of one mind.

If we were acting as a pair, we had to decide as a pair.

Because there were two of us.

It might not sound all that convincing coming from someone acted of his own accord to do some crazy things back in high school, but if this was my atonement, then I would need to make up for that part of me as well, or I wouldn't be able to say this was a new behavioral pattern for me.

This would be our new normal.

For the record, her proposal was not one that completely lacked merit, so instead of just mentioning it was rejected and tabling it there, I figured I'd share it openly—and in all honesty, it did serve as a useful reference in planning our future actions.

The core of the rejected plan was that we would break off our pairing.

According to Shinobu, the biggest reason we were caught in this inescapable double bind was that the King of Oddities was bound to my shadow, aka bondage in the literal sense.

If she wanted to go somewhere, if she wanted to do something, or perhaps if she didn't want to go somewhere, if she wanted to restrain herself, if she wanted to cross prefectural or even national borders, the two of us essentially had to operate in tandem—avoiding the "Cs" was an exceedingly difficult mission when it came to Shinobu and me.

As such, when Shinobu devised her plan to return to her home country, she had no choice but to invite me—it was most certainly not because she wanted to make me her henchman that she wanted to take me along on this trip that threw caution to the wind.

Well, to use a metaphor, Shinobu was basically a prisoner chained to an iron ball that was shaped like me, and in that sense, it was like she was being requested to limit her behavior, not just during the pandemic, but even in normal times.

Or was it less of a request and more of an order?

If she broke it, she would have to pay a fine. A heartbreaking one.

Opinions were surely divided on which of our restrictions were worse—Kagenui-san, who had already made it to Europe, being "unable to walk on the surface of the Earth", or ours. Incidentally, Kagenui-san was avoiding that curse by utilizing her *shikigami* tween girl as a "means of transportation" (though the idea of "utilizing" a "corpse doll" did not have a good ring to it).

As someone who did not want to bring attention to himself, it wasn't exactly a method of avoidance I could use myself.

However, this time around, while we were putting together the roadmap for our trip to the Acerola Kingdom (temp.), we were being allowed to borrow the services of that "means of transportation", but alas, the seats could not be reserved individually.

Like a package tour that could only be applied for as a pair—however, just like how you could apply for those package tours by yourself if you paid double the fee (though in reality it's more like 1.5 times the amount), we weren't necessarily incapable of canceling our strong bonds (or binds?).

As long as we took on the risk of doing so.

The thought of taking on any more risks made me dizzy, as though I were standing on one leg with my eyes closed, but basically, we would be temporarily breaking off our pairing.

It was a bit of a secret trick, but it wasn't some crazy rule-breaking method that was suddenly coming up after all this time. We'd done so before in the past as many as twice.

Two prior offenses.

We were outlaws that couldn't be absolved by paying fines.

Although, rather than us having done so ourselves, it was more like the cancellation was forced onto the two of us... The first time was when we were chased by the "Darkness".

When my shadow had been swallowed up by that mass of black that wasn't quite an oddity, the strong binding that should have been impossible to unravel was forcibly broken off—for the sake of metaphor, it was as though a computer had been rebooted, and for a short while, Shinobu and I had the rare experience of acting separately.

From what I heard, she'd even run into Black Hanekawa... Seriously?

It made me jealous.

"You can say you were jealous, but at the time, that cat was not just in her underwear, you know?"

"What a terrible misunderstanding you're having. That's not the reason I'm jealous."

It would be a pain if she pressed me with the question of for what reason I was jealous, so to explain the second example, our pairing had been broken the second time at the hands of Gaen-san.

She had, in fact, gone through the formal procedure of doing so, and though that made it sound like a traditional ritual had been solemnly performed, what actually happened was the scene of a slaughter where my body was hacked into pieces by a Japanese sword.

And though I was hacked to pieces, it was not a hack job.[60]

I had been given the death penalty.

No matter how strict the pairing was, it would naturally be broken when I died... To use the same computer metaphor, it would be like destroying its motherboard.

It was a miracle that repair was even possible.

In both cases, we'd asked Gaen-san for help with reinstating the pairing, and we'd stayed that way up until now... But wait, what about that time I went to heaven? I definitely did something like dying back then, but apparently the pairing hadn't actually been broken?

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[60] 滅多斬り *mettagiri* "hacking to pieces", 滅多 *metta* "thoughtless, careless".

Honestly, that case was so far beyond my understanding that I couldn't say anything for certain.

Well, they may have been a bit unorthodox, but in any case, all I wanted to say was that it was not the case that there were no back channels available to us if we wanted to break off the pairing we were bound by—if we could accomplish that, it would be possible for Shinobu to return to her home country on her own, and that was the theoretical plan that she had polished while she had been crouching.

As you may have guessed, the goal of her plan was purely for the sake of my own safety. It did not alter the level of risk to Shinobu herself in the slightest—there was no change to the theme of a vampire marching into a danger zone for vampires.

To march into a pandemic alone.

Without even any protective gear.

The amount of risk that was mitigated by reducing the number of people on the move, in this case, was completely mitigated. If anything, it would increase my anxiety.

"There's no way anyone would allow that. Obviously, I wouldn't allow it, but there's no way Gaen-san and Kagenui-san would allow it, either."

If anything, as a specialist in immortal oddities, Kagenui-san was likely to be the number one person against the idea.

I had no doubt that Shinobu was simply concerned for my safety, but the result was essentially freeing this prisoner from the iron ball she was chained to—if, unlike the prior cases, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire were to break off the pairing of her own volition, it would cause a crisis that was completely separate from the pandemic.

Perhaps specialists across the world would assemble in response.

It would be dreadful to reunite with Oshino under such a scenario.

Shinobu (and I) were afforded protection not for the reason that she had been rehabilitated, but for no other reason that Kissshot

Acerolaorion Heartunderblade had been rendered powerless and deemed of little importance.

And thus, a golden-haired young girl of little importance.

Kagenui-san would probably be overjoyed at the revival of the immortal oddity, and move to mercilessly pulverize her—I doubt she would listen to any of our excuses.

Undead men tell no tales.[61]

And if we were to reach that point, it was unlikely that the onee-san that knew everything would be all that willing to restore the pairing that we'd broken.

I don't know the two of you at all, was probably what she would say.

We'd never be able to regain our footing if we heard something like that from Gaen-san.

"I see... I did not consider things from that aspect. My imagination went only as far as the scene of hacking you to pieces with the Demon Blade 'Kokorowatari'."

"It ended up being a huge disaster when you did that last time, didn't it?"

Though it did allow me to meet "Princess Beauty" in heaven.

After recalling it for a bit, I decided I probably wanted to avoid meeting "her" a second time... Shinobu wasn't necessarily an idiot, but as someone who was once the strongest, greatest oddity, it seemed she wasn't really suited to coming up with plans.

She would end up resorting to plans involving brute force, befitting her family name of Oshino.[62]

Well, the root of the Oshino family name, Oshino Meme, was not at all the type to use brute force, so this wordplay wasn't really valid—but really, what sort of plan might Oshino come up with at a time like this?

How would he find a way to keep the balance and maintain neutrality?

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[61] A spin on 死人に口なし *shinin ni kuchi nashi* "Dead men tell no tales", with 不死 *fushi* "immortal".

[62] 力押し *chikara-oshi* "brute force", punning with 忍野 Oshino.

“That Hawaiian-shirt brat was always carrying a high level of risk, even before the pandemic, was he not? I do not know if he had any underlying conditions, but if he lived such an unhealthy and slovenly lifestyle, he would surely catch some other disease.”

Perhaps Shinobu was recalling the short time she had spent bound, not to my shadow, but to the ruins of the cram school that Oshino had made his headquarters, as she spat those words with a bitter expression—I had never once heard her speak of those memories fondly, had I.

If being bound to my shadow was preferable, what sort of glamping had Oshino been doing in those ruins?

But, some other disease, huh?

“They say that, once hand-washing and masks were fully enforced, it resulted in a lower incidence of the flu, too... On the other hand, if you were like Hanekawa in an area that was already in dangerous conflict even in normal times, you would have to prioritize the more pressing matter of evacuation over disease control.”

If you were unwilling to go to the hospital for a serious illness because you were afraid of closeness, then that was putting the cart before the horse, and something that should be avoided just as much as closeness. And, in much the same way, even if Shinobu wanted to cancel our pairing because she wanted to visit her sworn friend no matter what, it was not something I could consent to.

“However, I get how you feel. You want to rush in headfirst without considering the risk to yourself—”

She had miscalculated the level of risk just a little bit, but still, I understood. Her feelings, and her resolve.

And her spirit.

Unlike me, she was not afraid of a high level of risk to herself. And, since it was even more dangerous for her than it was to me, I ultimately found it necessary to accompany her, if only for the sake of keeping her from making any rash decisions—I had to think more proactively, instead of just leaving everything up to her.

Of course, it wasn't like I was all that careful myself, but still, it should be a decent tug-of-war between Shinobu's gung-ho attitude and my timidness.

There was no way I would allow these bonds to be split.

For the rest of time.

"In that case, we had better not keep Ononoki-chan waiting and let her know our decision. We can borrow her wisdom, too. Three heads are better than two, right?"

Of course, putting three heads together would create a close-contact situation before we could produce any results, but, well, two of those three were not even human, and the remaining one (aka me) was not necessarily human in the strictest sense, either.[63]

"Hmm. Could that corpse really come up with a good idea? She is a power-type character even more than I am, and she is a *shikigami* that was ousted from this house after performing some preposterous actions, is she not?"

You two sure were on bad terms.

You didn't really have to make such a disgusted face.

"But if we don't rely on Ononoki-chan, the trip itself will become an issue, y'know. We'll need to bow our heads to her at least once, so we may as well get it out of the way early on..."

"I will need to bow my head...? Me...? To that corpse girl...?"

Grr, growled Shinobu.

It wasn't so bad that she had to grind her teeth to the point of breaking her fangs... Despite her fall from King of Oddities to a golden-haired loli slave, it seemed her pride was as high as ever, though even that depended on the situation.

"It would really make it easier for me if you two could just chat it up and get along."

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[63] The original phrase for "Three heads are better than two" was 三人寄れば文もん殊じゅの知恵 *sannin yoreba monju no chie*, which means something along the lines of "If you put three people together, you can achieve the wisdom of Manjushri." The follow-up is just Koyomi ruminating on the counter for "three people" (三人 *sannin*) uses the *kanji* for "person, human" (人).

“I do not care one bit about the guiding principles of your harem.”

“But really, I don’t really think anything about bowing my head to her, either.”

“That is something that gives me pause. It sounds to me as though you are lacking in not just your pride, but your sincerity, as well.”

Apologize for what you are lacking, she said to me.

Then, I would do as she said.

Speaking of which, there had been a time when I’d prostrated myself in order to borrow her demon blade.

“However, before we are to head downstairs, I think we should carry out our doping first. I would like to raise the age with which I present myself and make sure I have taken a position above that tween girl before I bow my head to her, or it will be a stain on my reputation.”

“I think being that petty would be a bigger stain on your reputation... You’ll just be making a fool of yourself.[64] But I agree that we should do the bloodsucking first.”

It was how I would express, without using words, my resolve to cling to Ononoki-chan’s “Unlimited Rulebook”—though it was more like expressing the resolve to throw away the steering wheel during a game of chicken, but if I didn’t go that far, there was the chance that the tween girl with the professional mindset could talk me out of it.

The bloodsucking itself was something that occurred on a regular basis, so no special preparations were needed—after all, if I didn’t offer my blood from time to time, Shinobu would simply starve to death. In a sense, though it wasn’t the same as the gourmet Suicidemaster, Shinobu also had a pretty unbalanced diet.

The bite marks that had been left in the back of my neck would become the route taken by Shinobu’s bloodsucking (or, my blood donation to her)—so I pulled the clothes off of my upper body.

“I can just as easily suck your blood without you so provocatively stripping half-naked... ‘Tis an unnecessary fanservice scene.”

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[64] 沽券 *koken* “reputation”, ずっこけん *zukkoken*, a conjugation of ずっこける *zukkokeru* “to make a fool of oneself”.

As she said that, she climbed onto my lap. For the sake of her "meal", we could not avoid getting into a close-contact position—using partitions here would be unthinkable.

It was the same old routine as always.

The difference was the quantity of blood.

If I wanted to survive Ononoki-chan's mighty leap, the tiny bit of immortality I possessed normally would lead to me being torn to shreds in the stratosphere. Because it was like clinging to a rocket, after all.

We had to boost it even further.

Because we overdid it in the past, it had become a huge ordeal towards the end of my high school years, and after learning my lesson and becoming a university student, we hadn't performed any excess bloodsucking as far as I could remember. However, instead of trying to blindly avoid it, perhaps it was necessary to make an effort to control my constitution. Similar to how we would approach the coronavirus.

And as that immortality was boosted, the age that Shinobu appeared to be also changed.

When the age of her appearance changed, so too did her mental age—if she were to suck my blood dry without leaving a drop behind, then she would revert to her best condition of twenty-seven-years-old, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire. But of course, that would be going too far. It was a bit trivial, but one problem was that I would end up dying.

"It's a risky kind of rehydration, huh. By the way, when we went into battle with Ononoki-chan, you went into a tracksuit mode that was around eighteen years old, right?"

By tracksuit mode, she had worn Karen's fashion with a ponytail. Just before, I had gotten into the common situation of getting beaten up by Karen, and it apparently had a marked effect on Shinobu, who had been linked to me.

Marked, or perhaps, marked for defeat.[65]

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[65] 色濃い *irokoi* "marked, pronounced" shares *kanji* with 敗色濃厚 *haishoku noukou* "probable defeat".

“That does sound good. In that mode, both you and I should be able to withstand any high-altitude, high-speed movement. Not to mention, if there are to be any further anime adaptations, there will be no need for a new character design.”

“Is there any point in that level of forethought?”

Even if it were to happen, it would be ten or even twenty years into the future.

Didn’t you know how many volumes there were up to now?

“And I can’t even begin to imagine what the pandemic will be like in ten or twenty years from now.”

“Indeed. Humanity could even die out by then.”

“It’s terrifying that that might actually be a real possibility.”

If so, this novel was going to end up being a real happy-go-lucky one.

“Just to list them all for reference, we have had the ten-year-old mode with the bob cut, the twelve-year-old mode with long hair, and the seventeen-year-old mode with twintails.”

“Wasn’t there also a thirteen-year-old mode? Y’know, when you had braids and glasses to imitate Hanekawa. We can also call it middle schooler mode.”

“Right, right. How nostalgic.”

We’d gotten all excited over a weird topic.

Well, that was how things ended up when you’ve known someone for a long time.

It wasn’t as though we could simply pick and choose, but as expected, the matter of what level we should boost ourselves to was a difficult one. If we simply wanted to guarantee our safety during the flight, then there likely wouldn’t be any problem with the original suggestion of the eighteen-year-old mode, but depending on what we might encounter after we landed, it probably wasn’t something we should be deciding on so quickly.

If the level of vampirism was too low, we wouldn't be able to avoid the risk of the novel coronavirus. But if it was too high, we'd be unable to defend against the pandemic that was targeting vampires.

Furthermore, this was for the sake of helping Kagenui-san with her work, and there was no point if we were completely powerless—though we weren't professionals, I still wanted to put forth every effort when helping.

"Since I'm twenty years old now, maybe you should match with me and become twenty years old yourself. I bet we'd look pretty attractive. Or photogenic."[66]

"If we boost it that far, we shall be exterminated by that Kagenui before we can even be exposed to the oddity pandemic. I am sure part of why they turned a blind eye to us back then was because I had designed myself to appear as a teenager. Eighteen years old is just barely safe."

She made it sound more like camouflage.

Or was it like playing dead?[67]

Seeing as Shinobu's true age was six hundred years old, it wasn't so much deflating her age as it was inflating a red tide[68]—in reference to the innumerable dead plankton in the water.

"We could also go with the idea of filling in the gaps. We still haven't seen the eleven-year-old and fourteen-year-old forms... And, for the rest of the teenage years, there's also the sixteen-year-old and nineteen-year-old forms."

My completionist tendency was starting to show, but it wasn't really useful for something like that to manifest itself right now. Well, taking into account the various conditions, such as Shinobu's wish to be

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[66] The joke here is that Koyomi says 映える *haeru* "to look attractive", and follows up with 映える *baeru*, using the same *kanji* with a different pronunciation. The latter means something along the lines of "to look good in photos" (or "photogenic") and is a neologism that has come into usage particularly because of social media like Instagram.

[67] 擬態 *gitai* "camouflage", 擬死 *gishi* "playing dead".

[68] 鯖を読む *saba o yomu* is idiomatic for "inflating or deflating one's age" (or more broadly, "manipulating figures to one's advantage"), but literally means "to read mackerel", referring to when fish dealers would arbitrarily rate the freshness of mackerel in order to sell it. Koyomi amends the aquatic metaphor with 赤潮 *akashio* "red tide", also known as "harmful algal bloom".

older than Ononoki-chan (in appearance), the most legitimate conclusion would be greater than twelve years old but less than fourteen years old.

It would be legitimate to wonder what made that conclusion legitimate at all, but regardless, I figured we could take the average and go with thirteen years old.

It was a difference of five years.

From eight years old to thirteen years old—those five years were a tremendous length of time for a little girl.

And with that, it should minimize the side effects of the vampirism on my part—I hoped. If we were to repeat this many times, it would certainly not be the case, but the number was such that we could at least claim to have given consideration to the matter.

"Thirteen years old. It's kind of a vague, half-baked age, but it feels like it'll be barely within acceptable limits, as a temporary measure."

"Saying that thirteen years old is barely within acceptable limits is not half-baked—at this point, it's panaino!"[69]

With that, Shinobu opened her mouth wide and sunk her fangs into the back of my neck—this blood donation was neither non-essential nor non-urgent.

[69] From earlier in the series, ぱないの *panaino* is a variation of 半端ない *hanpa nai* "impressive", but can literally mean "not half-baked".

009

It was not entirely clear if my act of bringing a thirteen-year-old Shinobu down the stairs with me had come as a surprise to Ononoki-chan—not only was she expressionless already, but she had also finished eating her ice cream and had re-equipped her mask.

Gochisousa-mask.[70]

"Well, I figured you'd do that, *oni* onii-chan. You and Shinobu."

"How annoying you are. Do not state my name without any suffixes as though it were normal."

"Then, should I call you Shinobu-nee-san? Considering the way you look."

Oshino Shinobu, thirteen years old.

Previously, she had put her hair up in braids because she had been strongly influenced by the version of Hanekawa that we'd met just before, so my chest felt like it was growing with anticipation regarding what hairstyle she would choose this time—though it was really Shinobu that was growing from eight years old to thirteen years old, and as if to dodge the matter entirely, she'd concealed her blonde hair completely with a wide-brimmed hat.

All Ononoki-chan said was,

"A hat-wearing character, huh? You're just like Nade*kou* in the past,"

in her usual monotone.

This tween girl's reactions were pretty boring.

So Sengoku had stopped being a hat-wearing character... I hadn't heard anything like that from Tsukihi, either. That little sister of mine wasn't supplying me with any information at all—speaking of which, Tsukihi herself was someone that would frequently change her hair, too.

Though I had little interest in how she did her hair.

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[70] ごちそうさま *gochisousama*, a phrase said after a meal, with マスク *masuku* "mask". See footnote 16.

Whatever hairstyle she wore, I just looked at it as though it were bed hair.

"Nade*kou* has been growing out her hair like you, *oni* onii-chan. She's been so busy with work that it's gotten all messy."

"It seems you have not changed one bit, corpse doll."

"Well, because I'm a corpse. It would be pretty creepy if the hair of a corpse doll continued to grow. Although, when I was working together with Nade*kou*, there was a part where it got completely cut off. My neck, that is."

What sort of adventures was she having?

Rather than not having heard it, it was like I didn't want to hear it.

This twin-demic was despair-inducing for me, but it was possible that, for Ononoki-chan, it was a familiar state of emergency that she regularly anticipated... It wasn't as long as six hundred years, but Ononoki-chan was still the *tsukumogami* of a corpse used for a hundred years.

"Is that black cloak with a lace collar supposed to be cosplaying plague doctors? As an expression of gratitude towards medical workers, it seems a bit distorted, Shinobu-nee-san."

I had thought it was something like Kindaichi Kousuke's overcoat, but after hearing her mention how the collar seemed like one that those masked doctors would wear, I could see it that way, too—but not even Shinobu herself was aware of the inner workings of her unconscious mind.

It was not as obvious as when she put her hair in a ponytail or braids.

For a more normal explanation, it could just be that she wore a vampire-like cloak for the sake of returning to her home country... From a broader perspective, it did make her look more like a bat.

An outfit based in tradition.

It could even be considered formal wear, like how people wear *kimono* on New Year's.

"Anyway, it seems my kindness was all for naught. It's like this every time, I can't go on. I try to be considerate, and I just make a fool of myself. All right, shall we get going then, *oni* onii-chan, Shinobu-nee-san?"

I was expecting her to have more to say, but surprisingly, Ononoki-chan let us off with a few light complaints in that monotone of hers before standing up from the entryway—it was a bit of a let-down, but if she wasn't going to engage the brakes, that in itself made me nervous.

Weren't you our anti-lock braking system?

Plus, the empty ice cream cup was still in her hand... Well, at least she was thoroughly enforcing the infection control measures, what with taking garbage back with her.

It was a corpse, or rather, an attitude to learn from.[71]

"No point in trying to stop me, anyway. ...I don't know how long you'll end up staying there, but will your little sisters be all right if you leave the house like this?"

"Er, I haven't figured out what to do with that family problem, but since it's summertime in Europe right now... With the time difference, shouldn't it be fine? If we go in a flash and return in a flash, not even an hour will have passed over here, right?"

"Looks like I'll have to explain the general concept of time differences along the way."

And this has nothing to do with how time machines work in *Doraemon Long Stories*, said Ononoki-chan as she left the entryway—and, until the very end, she had not removed her boots at all.

It was a shame that I couldn't make her feel at home.

Shinobu and I hurriedly followed after her.

Seemed like this tween girl wasn't going to take it slow once it was time to leave.

I would have preferred to watch a longer scene of her and Shinobu chattering away—but, along the way? It didn't seem likely that we would

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[71] 死体 *shitai* "corpse", 姿勢 *shisei* "attitude".

be capable of long discussions during our leaps to Europe. I'd bite my tongue.

"Unfortunately, for long-distance trips like this, we can't afford to carelessly take off from the yard of your house, *oni* onii-chan, because of the layovers. Taking into account the Earth's rotation and gravitational pull, I have to choose our airfield carefully."

Rather than an airplane taking off, that was closer to the launching of a rocket—I doubted we'd be walking as far as Tanegashima, but Ononoki-chan steadily trudged forward without showing signs of stopping.

Despite her being a considerate tween girl, her explanations were kind of lacking... It had to be the pronounced influence of her master.

Regardless of what it was like as a high school third-year, a twenty-year-old university student walking alongside a young girl and a tween girl surely did not look good from a public safety perspective, but, considering the times, the streets were deserted.

Well, even if not for recent circumstances, my beloved hometown being in the remote part of the suburbs meant that it was growing more and more deserted, year after year—plus, it probably wasn't correct to refer to the thirteen-year-old Shinobu as a young girl.

What should I call her? A maiden?

"Time passes in the same way no matter where you are in the world, so even if there's a time difference of ten hours, it's not actually possible to travel to ten hours in the past—what do you think the International Date Line is for, *oni* onii-chan?"

Um, you didn't need to actually correct me.

I didn't actually think we could go back in time—I'd already had enough of time travel from the one time I did it with Shinobu.

"In the first place, I have to say your sense of danger is clearly lacking if you think we can go in a flash and return in a flash, *oni* onii-chan. Even though you don't even know if you'll make it back alive."

"Well, if you say that, I'm at a loss for words."

“Maybe you’ll at least get to say your last words.[72] I had thought that, with the spread of this contagion, the population of the world would become conscious of the reality of death on a tangible level, but maybe it isn’t actually like that. Even in a situation like this, it’s a very human thing to still go and say, ‘I’m sure I’ll be fine.’”

Harsh words coming from a corpse.

And calling it a “contagion” felt like an especially strong word... It seemed like two or three levels tougher than calling it an “infection”.[73]

It seemed the thirteen-year-old Shinobu agreed, as she said,

“For vampires, ‘contagion’ is more apt than ‘infection’, indeed,”

giving her own impressions.

“‘Twas the same for the plague, and speaking of which, rabies falls under that classification, does it not? It seems it was relatively well-controlled in this country, but it is a disease with a fatality rate of almost one hundred percent.”

In the sense that rabies makes you develop hydrophobia, the symptoms of rabies did indeed seem close to vampirism—it was like, which came first, the chicken or the egg? So in this case, it was more like, which came first, the vampire or the contagion?

“Vampirism is also transmitted via bites, after all,”

said Ononoki-chan.

“I guess it's the same for zombies. Though I’m a corpse doll, so strictly speaking, I’m not a zombie in the typical sense. The fact that there are so many hit films about zombie panics may act as proof for how subconsciously afraid people are of contagious diseases.”

And yet, *oni* onii-chan, you sure are fearless, was how Ononoki-chan continued—it had seemed odd that she’d accepted it so easily, but perhaps she was still annoyed by my rash decisions, which had not changed even after I’d become twenty years old.

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[72] Koyomi says ぐうの音も出ない *guu no ne mo denai* “being lost for words”, though the literal meaning is something like “can’t even make a forced sound”. Yotsugi says 断末魔の音が出るかも *danmatsuma no ne ga deru kamo*, which is something like “maybe you can make the sound of your death throes”.

[73] The context is basically as described, but for reference, the words used were 伝染病 *densenbyou* “contagious disease” and 感染症 *kansenbyou* “infectious disease”.

"Though, if there were zombie films that were big hits, there were also ones that were massive failures."

"I'll pray for you that this episode does not become a massive failure. Or a massive downfall. We have to support the film industry, after all. But really, what do you plan to do for your sisters?"

"Indeed. What is it that you are planning?"

Why was even Shinobu saying things as though she were criticizing me... It was troublesome when they were on bad terms, but it was also a problem when they banded together.

Don't view me as your potential enemy, all right?

"If only Mayoi-nee-san were here, it would've been getting the trio back together. But ever since she became a god, we can't just take her away so easily."

She did have the heavy responsibility of protecting the town.

But, well, if it was an infection that was targeting vampires, there might not be any meaning to bringing Hachikuji, even if she held the position of god... Other than the fact that it would make me happy.

Plus, I had the doubt that Kagenui-san's reason for inviting us was not so that we could assist her, but so that she could use us as samples.

And if samples wasn't the right term, then as guinea pigs—perhaps she wanted to intentionally infect us with the virus for the sake of developing a vaccine.

It was what was happening across the world.

Though she was also an immortal oddity, Ononoki-chan had (for now) not been infected, so it was even less likely for the god, Hachikuji, to be infected—even for the novel coronavirus, there were animals that did catch the infection and animals that didn't.

Dogs, cats, and even primates could get infected... Was that right?

"Dogs don't get infected as much, apparently. It's tough news for cat people, isn't it. Speaking of which, it was on the news that a tiger caught it, too."

If cats and tigers were susceptible, then that put Hanekawa at total risk, huh. Of course, we were still talking about the novel coronavirus,

not the anti-vampire virus. However, there had been the special case of when Hanekawa had worked together with Dramaturgy...

"Also, I don't necessarily have definite proof that I'm negative for that virus. To be negative about it, I might actually be positive. I might just be asymptomatic. If there are false positives, there are also false negatives—we're pretty much still looking into that. So, you should expect it to take quite a while. Even if it was an exaggeration to say you might not make it back alive, it's true that it might be on the scale of several years."

"....."

"Well, I'm sure not even onee-chan plans on keeping you for that long, *oni* onii-chan... Speaking of long, then for *oni* onii-chan, there's the long-term plan that Gaen-san has for you, after all."

Eh? Gaen-san was including me in a long-term plan of hers? I didn't know anything about that... Wasn't she telling me something really unsettling?

If possible, I'd like to remain unaware about this.

"Regardless, with how it's so strongly recommended you stay at home, isn't it bad for you to leave the house for such a long time? You'll be subject to extreme bashing from your little sisters."

"That level of bashing is something that even I, with a mindset as hard as steel, find it hard to withstand... But I'll send a message to my sisters. There's no way I can tell them the truth, so, well, I'll come up with a good excuse and try to gloss over it..."

Even if it was a necessity, I was essentially abandoning my post of taking care of my sisters that had been assigned to me by my parents, but after entering high school, my sisters had become much more responsible than I'd been expecting, so I wasn't too worried on that front. It was in critical situations that they were strong, and it was especially in critical situations that they shined. I wish I hadn't criticized them so hard for their activities as the Fire Sisters in middle school, if that was the reason for their mindset as hard as diamonds now.

The one who couldn't live up to his parents' expectations was just me.

"A good excuse, eh? If you would let me hear you out, then what good excuse have you managed to come up with? For going on an overseas trip during this time. For your 'Go To Overseas' campaign."[74]

"Well first, I won't tell them that I'm going overseas. That's clearly unbelievable... I'll say something about how I have to do a report or paper for university, or say there's an upcoming exam, and that I'll have to stay at my lodgings for a while. Or perhaps, I can say that Oikura was at the end of her rope after staying home all alone, and she reached out for help..."

"And is that not the most unbelievable lie? Perhaps that is not just a lie, but also a fervent wish of yours?"

What Shinobu was saying was basically true, and if possible, I wanted to call my childhood friend a "sworn friend", too—anyway, I was hoping we could move onto resolving the next problem, but it seemed Ononoki-chan still had some reservations.

"Let's say that everything gets resolved, but suppose you get infected by the pandemic targeting immortal oddities in Europe. Or suppose onee-chan infects you with it,"

she cut in.

Her cut-in was pretty cutting.[75]

"The second idea sounds scarier."

"If that happens, then even if you don't die, you might not be able to return to Japan. Because we can't completely eliminate the risk of you passing the disease on to your sister."

Ah, that could be a problem.

I hadn't considered it. As was always the case for me.

If Ononoki-chan was fine, then I figured my sister would be fine, too... In the first place, you could say that oddities themselves were

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[74] A reference to "Go To" campaigns started by Japan in the second half of the year 2020 to boost industries affected by the coronavirus, such as "Go To Travel" and "Go To Eat".
[75] 切り出す *kiridasu* "to begin talking", but can literally mean "to cut out". 切りつける *kiritsukeru*, "to cut at".

pretty far removed from the concept of life and death, so technically, all oddities could be considered immortal beings.

It was actually more uncommon to see oddities that had materialized.

"But it's true that we can't say anything for sure... I never planned on staying in Europe for the rest of my life, but now that I think about it, 'not making it back' could have that sort of meaning, too... Even if I were to insist that I'd be returning to my home country, I wouldn't be allowed to even depart if I get caught by airport security."

"In that sense, it won't even be easy to make it back dead, either."

Ononoki-chan was backing me up with something even harsher.

Aha, so the idea I'd been worried about, of confirming the identity of the body, was not actually very viable from that perspective... The fact that you were not allowed to witness the death of a loved one was yet another tragedy of this pandemic.

I'd never heard of a specific case in which that occurred, but I doubted they'd established a route to transport coffins for those that died of illness overseas...

"Realistically, doesn't it make more sense to cremate them first, and then transport the ashes across the sea? As long as it's a region where cremation is common... That's the difficulty of globalism. Even the way oddities are depends on the country. Even if you say 'vampires', even if you say 'Europe', it's different from region to region... The same way that Christmas or Valentine's Day is completely different."

Right, with Valentine's Day in Japan, it ended up becoming the kind of day where you just eat chocolate with people you get along with.

And at the same time, our vampires in Japan and their vampires in Europe could basically be considered separate species—the six-hundred-year-old Shinobu could act as a medium between the two.

"Both viruses and culture will mutate. In other words, we can't deny that there's no possibility for this virus, which currently only affects vampires, to transform into something that starts to infect other oddities—therefore, we must contain it as soon as possible. I said that

we were prepared for a long-term solution that could take several years, but obviously, there's nothing better than a short-term resolution."

"Then, let's go with that."

I wasn't trying to poke fun at Ononoki-chan's words, but I did find a solution to my current problem in them.

"We'll go to the Acerola Kingdom (temp.) and resolve the pandemic right away. The novel coronavirus might be too much for us, but we can resolve the anti-vampire virus—if we do so, we can come back without leaving the house empty for too long, and there's no risk of bringing back the contagion with us. Both my little sister and Hachiku-*jin* will be safe."

"There's a limit to how optimistic you can be."

Her monotone had an astonished ring to it, but Ononoki-chan continued with, "But, it could be important to have that sort of attitude," after that.

"When you draw out a war of attrition like this, it's not uncommon to start downgrading from your original objective. Like giving up on ensuring that there are zero infected patients—you end up learning to deal with the horror. Of course, it's a passable outcome, but it's too early to give up on the idea of complete eradication, like with smallpox."

And which virus did she think could be eradicated? Smallpox... I remembered learning about this in one of my classes when studying for exams, but in fact, smallpox was the only infection that humanity was able to completely eradicate. Even rabies was still in active duty across the world.

In that case, was there a hint in there somewhere?

I should have studied more properly.

"Speaking of which, even for normal overseas travel, there are regions where you're only allowed to go as long as you get certain vaccines. But what about the Acerola Kingdom (temp.)?"

"Well, it has already fallen to ruin, after all," said Shinobu. "Not even the worst plague will be able to exert its power there."

That was how it was.

It was an unthinkable form of herd immunity.

"We're here. This is a good spot to take off from. It's where I landed when I arrived here, too."

I was thinking we'd walked quite a long way while discussing various things, but where Ononoki-chan stopped with those words was a park that wasn't too far away—it was Shirohebi Park, which we were all familiar with.

When I was in high school, I often made the trip here on my bicycle, but it wasn't so far as to be beyond walking distance... I see, so beyond the conditions of the Earth's rotation and gravitational pull, perhaps there was a spiritual condition as well.

Because, from the perspective of Hachiku-*jin*, who protected this town, the park was like a detached territory of the Kitashirahebi Shrine—it was in an extremely limited way, but this Shirohebi Park could even be a match for Tanegashima as a launch site.

Hmm, it had been a while since I'd last been here... It hadn't changed much, or rather, it felt like it had become even more desolate—during this period of self-restraint, it should've actually become more common for parents to bring their children to play in parks, but here, there was no sign of life, as though it were surrounded by a barrier.

Was Hachiku-*jin* really all right?

The shrine didn't get abandoned again, right?

"When a contagion begins to spread, humans will start to wonder whether or not gods and Buddhas really exist, after all. In times like these, people are surprisingly less likely to pray to the gods. It means that the threat of this overwhelming reality is even scarier than oddities—though, in terms of being a threat that can't be seen with the naked eye, viruses and monstrous apparitions are the same."

Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

Which came first, the soy egg or the *char siu*?

After saying that ramen-related thing, Ononoki-chan took position towards the center of the park.

Well, it was sad to learn that my hometown was becoming more desolate than I'd thought, but right now, the fact that there were no signs of life in this park was exactly what we wanted... The scene of me wrapping my arms around a tween girl and soaring into the sky was not one I wanted witnessed by anyone else.

People would start sharing warnings about a suspicious person.

"And I suppose I am to be stowed away like carry-on luggage."

Shinobu said as much before diving into my shadow—was her choice to do so acrobatically a quirk of her thirteen-year-old form?

It was certainly an age where one would want to move haphazardly.

Perhaps she wasn't yet used to the delicate mind-body balance from being right in the middle of puberty—in that sense, the tender age of thirteen was a difficult one to be in.

When my little sisters were thirteen, it was so difficult to handle them that I didn't even want to recall it... Along those lines, I myself was not particularly decent when I was thirteen.

The aftermath of the mistakes I made in that period was that Oikura still continued to hate me. Well, in contrast, Oikura had been at her cutest when she was thirteen, but let's leave it at that.

In any case, the twelve-year-old Ononoki-chan did not have the waist size to allow for both the twenty-year-old me and the thirteen-year-old Shinobu to grab onto her, so Shinobu hiding in my shadow here was indeed proper boarding procedure.

"Although we should really be carefully debating whether or not the twenty-year-old *oni* onii-chan wrapping his arms around the twelve-year-old me by himself is proper procedure at all."

"True, because we do end up getting pretty close."

"It wouldn't be close, but a crime."[76]

As she said that, Ononoki-chan spread her arms in a *banzai* pose—and I grabbed onto her torso. It was a bit too passionate for a hug, and I was latching onto her in such a way that if this couldn't be called close contact, then nothing could be. But it was necessary. If my hands

[76] 密 *mitsu* "close", 罪 *tsumi* "crime".

slipped mid-flight, even my body which was boosted by doping wouldn't stand a chance.

I'd become a pool of blood.

There had been no change to my external appearance, but the twenty-year-old Araragi Koyomi was comparable to the thirteen-year-old Shinobu. Our immortal natures weren't perfect.

"But, thinking about it, you did a good job stoically restraining yourself up until now. Even though, *oni* onii-chan, you used to rely on your vampirism to the point of overdependence. Your actions today are not exactly praiseworthy when taken as a whole, but I will praise you for that much."

She was very much talking down to me, but hearing that made me feel a bit at ease... Especially in the current situation, where there was no such thing as a correct answer.

"With all that said, it certainly isn't bad to feel *oni* onii-chan's strengthened muscles up against my body for the first time in a while. Even if everyone else criticizes your rash and blind actions, I alone will praise them."

Was she trying to win me over?

Although her bosom was indeed soft...[77]

"It's because you say that stuff that you get criticized. I hope onee-chan grabs you and beats you to death in Europe."

"I'd like to choose how I die, though."

"That goes for anybody."

After saying that, the corpse doll concentrated her energy towards the lower half of her body—well, she was still a corpse, so referring to it as energy wasn't quite applicable, but she lightly bent her knees under her puffy skirt into a squatting position.

"Unlimited Rulebook—"

she chanted.

Attention, please.

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[77] 懐柔 *kaijuu* "winning over" shares *kanji* with 懐 *futokoro* "bosom" and 柔らかい *yawarakai* "soft".

Attention, please.

No matter how turbulent it is, it will have no effect on our operation—no matter how turbulent my heart is.

010

Considering the number of stops we were making along the way, it turned into quite a journey halfway around the world. The first stop was some uninhabited island in Okinawa, then various places on the Asian continent, then through the vicinity of Russia, and until we arrived in the range of Europe, Ononoki-chan continued to hop repeatedly—as someone whose excursions outside the prefecture were practically nonexistent, would it be good or bad to say that I'd experienced a lot of foreign countries all in one go?

No, of course it would be bad.

It would be too unreasonable to count this as overseas travel.

I hadn't even experienced any of the culture, not to mention the fact that the world wasn't exactly in a state to experience any cross-cultural exchange... Well, Ononoki-chan was not taking the shortest route but repeatedly hopping to perceptively choose the regions in which there were no infected people, but even so, there were no absolutes (not just in regards to this twin-demic, but in general, it was impossible to fully know whether or not there were cases of infection), so I couldn't openly state that I'd really enjoyed overseas travel.

Rather than a business trip, it was more like a top-secret mission.

After going through strong turbulence and severe changes in atmospheric pressure without rest, I'd blacked out or entered into a trance-like state several times, but I'd managed to remain clinging to the tween girl's back—it was such an intense airway that it would be no exaggeration to say that, if it weren't the back of a tween girl, I wouldn't have been able to keep clinging on.

Those ups and downs lasted for about two hours.

After repeating those roller-coaster jumps that made it impossible for me to not get nauseated—we finally managed to arrive right in the middle of Western Europe and Eastern Europe and Northern Europe and Southern Europe, reaching the Acerola Kingdom (temp.) situated right in the center.

Seeing as it had taken about a hundred pages to arrive, it really did feel like a "finally", but it would be nice if you could understand that this was due to a thorough enforcement of the stay-at-home order.

"Hm... 'Tis hard to say that this is a triumphant return, but 'tis even harder to say that this feels like my dearly missed hometown... With the current state of things."

The thirteen-year-old Shinobu, having crawled out from my shadow, was unsteady in her footing just like me—the physical ups and downs naturally did not have any effect within my shadow, but the link between us had been strengthened as much as our bodies, which meant that our senses were shared more than usual.

In other words, if Shinobu had planned on escaping motion sickness by lurking in my shadow, that plan would have failed—though there was a chance that her intense motion sickness instead came from crossing water (quite the number of times, at that) as a vampire.

However, when Shinobu said "the current state of things", she was not referring to the condition of Shinobu and me, but the sight of her homeland she was seeing after hundreds of years.

The sight.

Or perhaps, the blight.[78]

How should I put it—of course, Ononoki-chan would have taken safety into account and landed in an appropriate region, or so I wanted to think, but even bearing that in mind, it felt too much like a ruined country.

It was a wasteland that sprawled forth in all directions, as though it had quite literally been untouched for hundreds of years—if there were no towns, there was not even any greenery, and if there were no people, there weren't even any animals.

Far from any man-made structures, there was no sign of nature, with what felt like the bare surface of the Earth spreading out endlessly—I might have even believed that, with the force of Ononoki-chan's jump, we'd landed not in Europe but on the moon.

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[78] 風景 *fuukei* "sight, scenery", 殺風景 *sappuukei* "dreary, bleak".

There was no hope of going sightseeing or partaking in the local cuisine.

It couldn't even be called uncharted territory.

"I've never been there before, but if you flattened the Grand Canyon, it might end up looking something like this..."

If you wanted me to compare it to a place I *had* been to before, I would say that this felt more like hell than hell itself... Even if the country had fallen centuries ago, you would think that it would have been reclaimed by new life after so much time had passed.

It was as though the question of whether to classify viruses as living beings became irrelevant, because it seemed like not even those could survive here—it was so sterile in a negative sense that I was surprised I was still able to breathe.

With the country in this state, it felt like there was no need to worry about distancing... But this was in fact the epicenter of one half of the twin-demic, the anti-vampire virus, right?

"It seems my curse... That is, the curse of 'Princess Beauty' is still in effect. For it to be a wasteland where not a single insect can live, where not a single blade of grass can grow."

A beauty that forced any form of life into killing itself.

A hellish sight that could not even be captured in a painting.

When I'd heard only half the story in the Mirror World, it sounded like an unbelievable "myth", or even a "fairy tale", but seeing it for myself had a different impact... It felt like I was being overpowered by the completely barren landscape.

It was an impactful, yet true, story.

Ononoki-chan, surely having visited this land plenty of times due to her work, did not appear to be experiencing the same emotions as me and Shinobu, instead sitting directly onto the blighted earth and starting to massage her legs.

As a corpse, she shouldn't be feeling pain or tiredness, but with that many mighty leaps, it seemed one would start suffering from not metal fatigue, but corpse fatigue... It wasn't really my place to say this as

someone who'd been given a ride, but it was just that Kagenui-san's usage of her was reckless—she was not originally an oddity suited for long-distance travel.

She might have even expended more energy in those moments than she would have if she traveled halfway around the world on foot.

I doubted that this empty landing place was meant to be our final destination, but I supposed she needed to rest for a bit—this was like a service area for drivers of long-distance buses.

Though it was more like a serviceless Area 51.

"But for such a large country like this, for such a large territory, isn't it weird, historically, that it hasn't been annexed into any of the neighboring countries? Is that also the curse of 'Princess Beauty', golden-haired maiden?"

"Golden-haired maiden sounds so normal, 'tis a little boring."

"Well, I'm not a fan of calling you a golden-haired young girl when you're like this."

"But I imagine it has little to do with the allure of 'Princess Beauty', and instead involves political circumstances... There is no way anyone would find this cursed, barren land to be desirable."

I see.

In terms of colonization, it was a locale where not even planting trees was viable,[79] and rather than growing anything, people would starve to death[80]—last year, when Hanekawa had briefly returned to Japan, I'd heard from her that a country often began falling to ruin as a result of expanding its territories to excess.

If anything, the Acerola Kingdom (temp.) falling due to beauty was an exception even among exceptions—and the result was the formation of a small neutral zone in Europe. A country of permanent neutrality, though in a different manner than Switzerland... Though it was not a country, but a ruined country.

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[79] 植民 *shokumin* "colonization", 植樹 *shokuju* "tree-planting".
[80] 植える *ueru* "to grow", 飢える *ueru* "to starve".

"For the record, not everything you can see belongs to the Acerola Kingdom (temp.). The surrounding countries had also gotten wrapped up and fallen to ruin, as well."

"I see... The allure of a beautiful woman knows no bounds, huh."

This wasn't just a nuisance to others.

An entire continent had gone atilt.

That in itself made for a dandy tale.[81]

But if this country had so thoroughly fallen to ruin, then was our doping not really all that necessary? Far from there being any people, there were not even any animals that could act as carriers, so there was no risk of being infected by the novel coronavirus... And if we wanted to be on guard against the anti-vampire virus, then it would have been more appropriate to raise our human natures.

Of course, without any boosting, we couldn't have become platinum members of ONK Airlines, so some amount of bloodsucking was needed... Perhaps not at thirteen years old, but a ten-year-old Shinobu with bobbed hair would have been enough to withstand the atmospheric pressure changes.

Though it was easy to say anything after the fact.

Even now, there was already the fear that Shinobu and I had already been infected by the lethal anti-vampire virus—if the contagion emerged from this uninhabited wasteland, then there was a high chance it was not a virus spread via droplet transmission like the novel coronavirus, but via airborne or aerosol transmission.

At the moment, I wasn't experiencing any discomfort or potential symptoms, but there would of course be an incubation period... I'd been thinking we had made this journey after careful consideration, but after actually setting foot on the land of a foreign country, of a ruined country, I couldn't help but feel that we'd been a bit too reckless.

We'd made the assumption that, if we wanted a speedy resolution, that shortcut involved bringing the former King of Oddities and former

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[81] 傾物語 *Kabukimonogatari* refers to the eighth novel of the *Monogatari* series, with the title having been translated as "Dandy Tale". The literal translation could be something like "Tilted Tale", as it shares *kanji* with 傾く *katamuku* "to slant, to tilt".

princess directly on location, but how much of that was actually correct...? Eh, there was no use in regretting things now.

It might be easy to say anything after the fact, but I shouldn't. Just keep quiet.

That was just acting like a little goody two-shoes, though I was already twenty years old.

I could at least act like a good adult.

If I decided to do something, I just needed to see it through to the end.

"But I never thought a land could look this faded, just from there being no life... Compared to this, I get the feeling even a desert would look like it was teeming with life."

With cacti and oases... And camels, and weren't there those fox-like cats, too? Once again, sorry for my vague knowledge on the matter.

"If left untouched for a thousand years or so, I am sure this place will turn into a desert itself. Though I believe it depends on how many hours of daylight there are... Well, they say even the Tottori Sand Dunes will receive snowfall."

For some reason, this thirteen-year-old was talking about Japanese tourist attractions after coming all this way... Like some tourist that was craving Japanese food after making their way overseas.

"Thanks for the wait. I've finished refueling. Now, if you've enjoyed your one-hour tour of your beloved birthplace, we can embark on our last flight to meet onee-chan."

Ononoki-chan extended her legs for the last time to stand up—as expected, she had already taken off her mask by now. From this point on, there was no need for this corpse doll to worry about droplet transmission.

We were going to Kagenui-san, huh?

My body started to feel a tension that was different from what I was feeling before.

Plus, no matter what happened, I was sure to take some number of punches from her.

"It's not like she's actually in Romania, right? She'd said she was somewhere around Romania... And Bran Castle seemed to be pretty far off."

Maybe it was something like how you could see Mount Fuji from anywhere in Japan?

"Yeah. That was her having gone there for the sake of getting reception for the video call. Originally it had been to get in contact with Gaen-san—but then we just happened to get a message from you, *oni* onii-chan."

If so, then the timing was on the level of a miracle.

I'd been trying to avoid Gaen-san, but I'd ended up linking up with Kagenui-san, who'd been trying to contact Gaen-san—was my usual conduct really all that bad?

And I hated that it made too much sense.

"Our base is located in a different area. It's not as barren as here, but there's no mistake that it's also a country that's fallen to ruin."

"Mm... So basically, it's one of the neighboring countries that Shinobu mentioned had also fallen to the allure of 'Princess Beauty'?"

"Nope. There's another reason for the fall of this country—if I say that, then even thickheaded Shinobu-nee-chan should get an idea, right?"

"Who are you calling thickheaded?"

I am as sharp as the fangs of a vampire, said Shinobu in a display of displeasure—she was as weak to provocation as ever, but I wouldn't expect any less from her. It was because of that sharp intuition that we'd come all this way to the other side of the Earth, after all.

"I am fully aware. I had an inkling even before you said as much. 'Tis not Bran Castle in Romania, but the 'Corpse Castle' in the 'Corpse Kingdom', correct?"

"Corpse Kingdom"? "Corpse Castle"?

Yet again, some dangerous-sounding names had come up—those names made them sound like they were destined to fall to ruin, but the air was too serious for me to start making fun of them.

The seriousness of the situation was transmitted to me through the air.

Just like a contagion.

"'Tis the former castle of my sworn friend, the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster."

In that accursed castle.

Was where I became Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

011

Apoptosis.

The phenomenon can also be referred to by the term suicide genes, but considering the details behind the use of the term “own goal” instead of “suicide point”,[82] I wasn’t sure how long the term “suicide genes” would last, either—however, considering Shinobu’s sworn friend who went by the name of Suicidemaster, it may be a more appropriate term to describe the state of the Acerola Kingdom (temp.).

Appropriate, and yet inappropriate.

If the allure, or curse, of “Princess Beauty” were to be scientifically analyzed, her trait of driving any form of life into killing itself could perhaps be described as an infestation that rewrote all genes into suicide genes.

The person herself had become an immortal vampire and departed from her country, but her influence remained dyed upon the land, unchanged—Shinobu had described it as political circumstances, but it seemed unlikely that the reason neighboring countries did not claim this land for themselves was completely unrelated to that curse.

All the more so if the surroundings themselves were ruined countries.

I couldn’t say anything for certain, since it all occurred extraordinarily far back in the past, but I figured making it clear could potentially bring us to the heart of the matter regarding the anti-vampire virus.

Because it was a land where nothing could live.

It would not be bizarre if it brought forth an oddity that could kill the immortal.

No—it would be a part of the bizarre.

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[82] In Japanese, the term for “own goal” used to be 自殺点 *jisatsuten* “suicide point”. After a Colombian player scored an own goal in the 1994 FIFA World Cup and was later shot to death, the Japan Football Association officially switched from using the term “suicide point” to the English term “own goal”.

“Unlimited Rulebook—”

There was the possibility that we had already been infected, but the three of us departed on our final flight towards the “Corpse Kingdom” as though we were seeking refuge from the cluster outbreak—by now, I had gotten pretty used to the turbulence.

I’d probably be fine for about two more jumps.

No, that was a lie.

I was already fed up with just the idea of returning home… Even in the best-case scenario where we were able to resolve the matter of the anti-vampire virus, if there was nothing to be done about the threat of the novel coronavirus, we would have no choice but to once again rely on ONK Airlines for the return trip, not with a direct flight but with multiple layovers.

Though, before that, it would be nice if we were able to return at all.

In any case, after about three hours (including the break) since we departed from Japan, we arrived at our final destination of the “Corpse Castle” in the broad daylight of summertime—because the Acerola Kingdom (temp.) had captured my attention with the ground surface, I hadn’t paid much heed to the sky, but because my vampirism was stronger than usual, the sun felt that much more radiant.

I’d heard that, in Europe, the rays of the sun were harsh even normally… It would have been nice if I’d brought sunglasses with me.

Squinting from the radiance, I looked up at the “Corpse Castle” where Kagenui-san and Suicidemaster awaited us—to be honest, I wasn’t looking forward to it all that much.

After all, it was after I’d seen that sight—that blight.

Since it was similarly a ruined country, I’d assumed that the “Corpse Kingdom” would look more or less the same, and in fact, when I was barely able to look down upon the Earth with my arms wrapped around a tween girl, the kingdom adjoined the Acerola Kingdom (temp.) to the extent that I couldn’t even tell where the border was.

Well, the level of awareness of national borders in an area like this was likely at the same level as the inhabitants of an island nation, as

Hanekawa would put it... However, when I looked up at the "Corpse Castle" from our landing coordinates, the building looked weathered and crumbling here and there, but it still retained most of its original form.

The fact that the castle alone retained its original form amidst the desolate surroundings made its grandeur and strangeness all the more striking—this was the castle of the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster.

Death—something that would never fade.

And nothing gave off the impression of death more than this.

"In the first place, Deathy herself abandoned this castle quite a long time ago. I believe it was quite soon after I became a vampire that she left. As someone interested only in food, she lacked the life skills to manage such a huge castle."

Of course, it seemed pretty natural for an immortal vampire to be lacking in life skills—but what about the time she *did* spend here?

"Did she hire a maid or something?"

"My sworn friend is not like you in the slightest, but 'tis true that she employed a butler to manage the castle's chores. What was his name again? That's right—"

Tropicalesque Homeawave Dogstrings.

"—Was the name. Like me, he was a former human turned into a vampire after Deathy sucked his blood, but Tropicalesque was treated as one of Deathy's thralls."

"Did that Tropicalesque guy happen to have any connection to 'Tropical-Rouge! Pretty Cure'?"

"Of course not. Do not try to look for collaboration opportunities."

The thirteen-year-old scolded me.

This was perhaps the most important thing, but when scolded by a thirteen-year-old, it really gave me the feeling that I was being scolded...

It was completely different from when I was playing with an eight-year-old.

As expected of the real-life PreCure generation.[83]

“But how did that thrall Tropicalesque end up leaving the castle?”

“To tell you the conclusion without spoiling too much, I killed him.”

"....."

Please provide a little more detail.

I’d be okay with a little bit of spoilers.

“I suppose I can add that killing Tropicalesque was the direct cause of my decision to become a vampire.”

That additional information was liable to cause even more misunderstandings, but while Shinobu was being self-abasing, she was by no means intentionally pretending to be evil—I was not particularly fond of the argument that “killing one person makes you a murderer, but killing a hundred people makes you a hero”, but considering she had brought an entire country to ruin, it was clear that it should change the criteria a bit.

The standards for good and evil would shift.

And that would also apply to how the world was destroyed in a parallel timeline... In that respect, it resembled how my views on life and death had changed due to the pandemic.

After learning what kind of past Shinobu had been carrying, it was no surprise that Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade could not comprehend what I had gotten so mad about during that hellish spring break. In neither a good way nor a bad way, there was a division between her views and mine that it was natural they did not agree.

A separation.

At present, if that gap had been bridged to some extent, I wasn’t sure if I could consider that good or bad, either—there’d been some talk about how the old me would not have been intimidated by the prospect of traveling under these circumstances, but at the very least, it if were

[83] Apparently, girls in their early teens can be referred to as the “real-life PreCure generation” as they’re in the same age range as the PreCure characters.

the spring break version of me, accompanying Shinobu to two separate ruined countries probably would not have happened.

The idea of traveling during the pandemic had given me pause, but the flip side was that, because the pandemic had shaken my sense of values, I had gained the resolve to go on this trip.

"The castle has lasted surprisingly well despite having lost its master and its caretaker. Though they say a house will soon fall apart if no one lives in it."

"It's not as if a vacant house will have a caretaker."

As expected of a former resident of an abandoned building.

"For this castle, you could say that it's because the master left that it's managed to last until this long,"

said Ononoki-chan, lifting the hem of her skirt and rubbing her legs—it seemed her knees had reached their limit. I felt apologetic to the point of wanting to massage her legs for her.

"And that's why, in the present day, it can serve as an isolation ward."

Isolation ward... I see.

That term came off as sounding a bit too strong, but it had now become common sense that, when it came to an infectious disease, proper zoning was absolutely essential.

In one sense, it would simply be isolating at home, but for Suicidemaster, who had lost her thrall and parted ways with Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, she had once again returned to her castle six hundred years after leaving it.

Could this also be seen as not leaving home, but returning home?

"...Will it be okay to visit her?"

"As long as you get permission from the attending physician, or rather, the attending *onmyouji*."

From the faint trembling of her voice, it was clear that Shinobu's thoughts went beyond just, "I'd like to witness the moment of my sworn friend's death, even if it's just a glimpse," but Ononoki-chan responded flatly in her usual monotone.

Usual or not, as a corpse, the makeup of Ononoki-chan's vocal cords meant that she couldn't speak in anything but a monotone. However, her flat response was likely different from mere apathy and instead a simple statement of the truth.

"And that's only if she's still alive."

No—the truth was even harsher.

We crossed a drawbridge that spanned a waterway that had completely dried up, and when we entered the castle itself, I got this impression—it was something like a save point. It was entirely an expression from the era of video games, but the scene before me felt that much unreal—though there was no need to go on any more mighty leaps, but I couldn't help but feel restless, that I was still up in the clouds.

Because in what appeared to be a ballroom, and in every room after that, there was a massive number of coffins lined up—rather than lined up, perhaps it was more precise to say they were piled up.

Like Tetris.

Though that was another video game comparison.

There were so many coffins that there was almost nowhere to walk—the stage had been set such that wherever I walked, it was likely one of my feet would plunge into a coffin.

It was completely the morgue of vampires.

The Corpse Castle—a place of corpses.

"The tough thing about this contagion is that those that pass away from the anti-vampire virus do not have their corpses turn into ash and disappear. But perhaps this is a familiar sight for the six-hundred-year-old Granny Shinobu?"

"Who are you calling Granny Shinobu."

The thirteen-year-old Shinobu made a disgusted face.

However, that disgust was probably not directed at Ononoki-chan. Well, if we weren't going as far back as the Black Death or the Spanish flu, then things hadn't gotten to this extent in Japan (for now), but it was

a sight that could just as easily be seen from the current novel coronavirus.

"When I was isolating at home and taking online lessons, I often felt that this must be what wartime was like, but I figure wartime was actually worse than that."

I'd made the comparison of fighting a virus to war before, but after hearing the argument that excessively treating viruses as hostile could lead to viewing patients and the deceased hostile as well, I felt ashamed of my own ignorance.

And of course, they wouldn't be holding online lessons during a war.

"That's right. However, from a global perspective where wars are being waged with information technology, you could say it's wartime right now."

Ononoki-chan's words sounded like something Hanekawa would say—one aspect of globalism was that it allowed for a wider spread of the infection, but could another difference between past epidemics be the ability to gather various opinions from many directions all at once?

"Well, they say that for the Spanish flu, if it hadn't been in Spain, there wouldn't have been a flu. Because misinformation spread just as much as the virus did."

The terror of groundless rumors, huh?

Well, in that respect, misinformation was still prevalent in our current information society... In the end, before coffins, humanity was powerless.

And perhaps, even vampires.

"For vampires, the sickbeds they are hospitalized in can become the very coffins they are laid to rest in. That's the only difference between them and humans."

"...Among all these coffins, there's no chance that Dramaturgy or Episode is sleeping in one of them, right?"

"There's none. Or so I'd like to say, but I wouldn't be surprised if that had become the case while I was out."

“Hmph. ‘Tis more astonishing to me that so many vampires still exist in this modern society.”

Shinobu was speaking in a way that showed no consideration for the feelings of the bereaved—though when it came to vampires, the bereaved would not be family, but thralls.

But at the same time, she had a point.

Even if Europe was known for its vampires… Did this mean that interest in the occult had not yet died out?

“Though it’s on the verge of death. Oh, but to provide a bit of good news, unlike the novel coronavirus, the risk of dying from the anti-vampire virus apparently has no correlation to age. Whether you’re six hundred or eight or thirteen years old, the fatality rate is completely the same at one hundred percent.”

It was the same fatality rate as rabies.

That wasn’t good news in the slightest, but perhaps this information could be a form of consolation for Shinobu and Suicidemaster, who had lived longer lives than even Dracula.

There wouldn’t be any intergenerational divides coming from those having lived longer carrying a higher risk.

“There are specialists that have come up with hypotheses as to what is exactly considered a vampire among the various kinds of oddities. Like zombies, there are heaps of oddities that suck out the lifeblood of humans, after all. But onee-chan, who can be pretty crude, sides with those that think that there’s no meaning to the detailed classification of immortal oddities.”

I couldn’t help but shudder at the thought of such a faction, but one way or another, it seemed she was still an *onmyouji* after all… You could say it was up to the individual how much the “*oni*” of Japan coincided with the “*oni*” in vampires.[84]

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[84] 吸血鬼 *kyuuketsuki* “vampire” includes the *kanji* for 鬼 *oni*. The literal translation for “vampire” could be “blood-sucking *oni*”.

Right, but it was less important what each individual specialist thought and more important what the anti-vampire virus thought—not that a virus held any intentions.

If we return to times of peace, maybe someone will make a game out of anthropomorphized viruses.

"For the time being, we've been sealing the lids of the coffins, but it's not like we've vacuum-packed them. There's no guarantee that the virus won't leak out, so let's move along. Onee-chan's in the library up ahead."

"Library? So such a room existed in this 'Corpse Castle'."

Perhaps she didn't remember because it was six hundred years ago, or perhaps books were not so popular in the time of 'Princess Beauty', for Shinobu had said that sounding rather clueless—as for me, I was thinking that the match-up of Kagenui-san with a library was more astonishing.

"Though the books have all completely deteriorated by now. They were so poorly preserved that they'll crumble when you touch them. It just happens to be a room that's not too close but not too far for the sake of monitoring Suicidemaster fighting her illness in the throne room."

"I see."

That made sense.

But also, it meant that Kagenui-san was stationed as the guard that we would have to overcome to meet Suicidemaster. If Shinobu did not remember that a library existed, she surely would not remember if there were any secret paths to the throne room, so an encounter with the violent *onmyouji* was inevitable.

"By the way, are there any more specialists here? At the 'Corpse Castle'."

"Of course, with this pandemic being the number one priority, we're receiving contact from experts in various fields across the world, but we're avoiding gathering all in one place so as to not crowd together. Just like any other job right now—only onee-chan is stationed permanently here."

"Uh-huh... Does that mean that Kagenui-san is a specialist with global recognition?"

Hearing that we hadn't been the only ones called made me feel as though I'd literally gained a hundred allies (regardless of whether they would consider a scoundrel like me an ally), but while I would have easily accepted it if it were Gaen-san in this important position, I'd been thinking of Kagenui-san as more the outlaw-type to be branded as a heretic in these academic societies...

"*Oni* onii-chan, your perception of onee-chan is as awful as ever, but unfortunately, there are people who hold those viewpoints. People that view her as a heretic."

"So she is, huh."

"However, onee-chan has a long history with Suicidemaster. And on top of that, she was rated as being qualified for the role of monitoring—but that's just trying to be positive, and it's really the short end of the stick."

A long history...

Last April, before the world had changed so drastically, she had hinted as much, but ultimately, I hadn't heard the details.

A long history, to the point of having killing intent.

Back then, because the modern Suicidemaster had become even more powerless than Shinobu, it had dampened the mood of Kagenui-san's killing intent, so things had come to somewhat of a resolution—but if Suicidemaster, fighting her illness in the throne room, had become even weaker, then there was no need to worry about things getting heated... It was a small bit of relief.

The relationship between Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster and Kagenui Yozuru—and, the relationship between Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster and Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

And I can't say she has no relation to me, either.

"We've arrived. This is the library. Have the two of you prepared yourselves? To be beaten up by onee-chan."

And why should we be preparing ourselves for that.

That was what I wanted to say, but from experience, Kagenui-san was the sort of specialist where it was essential for me to prepare myself even if we didn't possess any vampiric qualities—if so, then I would prepare myself.

Prepare for my heart to be beaten up.

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If Ononoki-chan hadn't said so in advance, I probably would not have realized that it was ever a library, for the room was gloomy and dusty, as though not just the books but also the air itself had deteriorated. And in that room, Kagenui-san was squatting atop a book stand, as ill-mannered as ever—since her curse was "being unable to walk on the surface of the Earth", if we were in a building with a roof above us, then no matter how worn or crumbling it was, I figured it would be not the Earth's surface but the floor. Well, perhaps it had simply become a habit for her.

"Haha. Video calls ain't so bad, but you do give off a different impression in person, Araragi-kun. Really feels like you did turn twenty."

So even in this gloomy room, my image quality had still improved... The era of 5G couldn't come soon enough. It was about a year since we'd met in person, but really, I only ended up seeing this person in scenes of carnage, didn't I.

Perhaps she was an incarnation of carnage.[85]

Or perhaps it was me.

"I haven't grown any taller, though. It's unfortunate, but it seems this is as tall as I'll get. Though it seems we've both grown out our hair a bit."

"It's lookin' like the former Heartunderblade grew a little, though."

Of course she wouldn't miss that detail.

It made me anxious... I'd tried to be conscious of picking an age that wouldn't incur Kagenui-san's wrath while still being older than Ononoki-chan, but thinking back on it now, it felt like kind of a sneaky decision.

It felt more like I'd incur her wrath for playing such a cheap trick.

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[85] 修羅場 *shuraba* can mean "scene of carnage", derived from 修羅 *shura*, which means "Asura" (in the Buddhist sense) with a second meaning of "carnage, conflict".

If we really did just want to slip through the midway point of the twin-demic, would it have actually been correct to straightforwardly aim for a twenty-year-old form...? Now that we were meeting up like this, Kagenui-san would probably be displeased by us trying to get on her good side.

This was yet another archaic viewpoint, but it seemed very true that there were things you could only realize by meeting face-to-face instead of through remote work.

"Hm. Well, it ain't really my place to apologize for not staying in contact. Yotsugi, you can go back. Good work. Get some rest for a bit."

"Understood. Onee-chan, you should also get some rest when you get the chance."

Unusually, Kagenui-san imparted words of appreciation towards Ononoki-chan, and even more unusually, Ononoki-chan responded with thoughtful words in kind—so that was the sort of situation we were in, huh.

And, retracing her steps to exit the room, the corpse doll looked back and murmured, practically to herself,

"It would be empty words to say the same to you, *oni* onii-chan,"

before departing for the room of coffins downstairs—once again, I'd been condescended upon by that tween girl.

Even though all I'd done was cling to her back, it wasn't like I wasn't tired from the long-distance travel, but I couldn't exactly go and sleep in the same bed as Ononoki-chan.

It was going forward that my resolve would be tested.

I would have to remain alert.[86]

"Sheesh, how long will it take for Ononoki-chan to start respecting me?"

"'Tis impossible for you to earn the respect of anybody."

After that flat denial, the thirteen-year-old Shinobu then said,

"Kagenui,"

facing forward.

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[86] 覚悟 *kakugo* "resolve", 覚醒 *kakusei* "awakening, alertness".

It was regrettable, but even if it was just after I'd read *The Betrothed*, I couldn't hold a session of pleasant chatter when we were up against Kagenui—this was one person we couldn't mess around with.

The risk was too high.

It would be different if this were still a remote conference, but in person, it would be one of those physically violent *manzai* acts... I had to agree that in this respect, there were merits to online meetings.

"To be straightforward, I would like to be allowed to meet my sworn friend—I will help you out in any way you would like me to, so first off, would you step aside and let me talk with Deathy?"

Ooh, her request had come abruptly, but it was very direct.

Her tone of voice remained presumptuous, but that was inevitable considering she was the former King of Oddities. However, Shinobu had not once bowed her head to the specialist Oshino, not even when her limbs had been severed from her... Had she grown in a way beyond just the appearance of her age?

Or was it because her sworn friend was her sworn friend?

"Well, I ain't gonna get in your way, and that was why I called the two of you over in the first place, but you'll have to go along with our arrangements. There are some precautions—after all, you wouldn't wanna be the one responsible for finishing off that Deathy of yours in her sickbed, would you, former Heartunderblade?"

"...Fine."

Though her demand was gently (relative to Kagenui-san) brushed aside, Shinobu did not throw a tantrum or stomp her feet in frustration... I could tell that she was willing to compromise on what she could.

Not a subversive attitude, but a reasonable one.[87]

It seemed that it really was no exaggeration to say that Suicidemaster was to Shinobu as Hanekawa was to me (though I was made to retract that statement).

Then, she was even liable to prostrate herself.

Though I didn't want to see her go that far.

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[87] 打倒 *datou* "subversion, overthrowing", 妥当 *datou* "reasonable, appropriate".

"So? What are the precautions? For the record, both I and my master are resolved to die from the anti-vampire virus if need be."

"Eh, now hold on, Shinobu-chan, I wouldn't say I'm resolved to die..."

"It ain't just limited to now, but when people make decisions, they tend to choose between the two options of life and death. But it'd be good for you to realize that it ain't uncommon to end up livin' on while sufferin'."

Ignoring my lack of resolve, Kagenui-san responded as such—she was making it sound like Suicidemaster, or the other vampires fighting their illness, would end up that way.

"Nah, I'm talkin' more in general. The elderly might be at higher risk for the novel coronavirus than the younger folk, but part of that is because improved medical care for the elderly has allowed for an aging society, right? Even if you're not an immortal oddity, these days you can live as much as a hundred years, just like Yotsugi. Kinda ironic that the development of medical care has put strain on that very medical care, hm?"

Kinda like how vampires that have lived too long will resort to suicide, said Kagenui-san, making a statement of ridicule towards not Shinobu but all vampires as a whole—on the other hand, there was a balance, or rather, an imbalance formed from the declining of birth rates.

There was no kind of virus, and perhaps no kind of beauty, that could steal away a life that hadn't been born—that was what came to mind as I recalled that barren country.

"If we are speaking of irony, then what could be more ironic than you, who has made it your purpose in life to pulverize immortal oddities, now being in charge of an isolation ward? It's the most biting irony."[88]

It seemed that Shinobu could not remain nonchalant when it came to the dig at the affliction that affected all vampires, their suicidal

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[88] 風刺 *fuushi* "irony, sarcasm" shares *kanji* with 刺さる *sasaru* "to prick, to pierce". I chose "biting" to the same effect, as a word more commonly paired with irony in English.

impulses, and naturally she retorted—hold on, the affliction that affected all vampires?

Shinobu herself had come to Japan in order to die—

"That's true. Even a free spirit like me can't go around doing only the work that I want to. Well, in times like these, I really should be thankful that I have work to do at all. Can't be choosy about my work or my methods."

By her methods, did she mean how she called us amateurs over to Europe? It seemed she was aware that it was a bit of a bootleg method—or maybe she was just taking the attitude of, if you've eaten poison, may as well lick the plate.[89]

Poison...

"...Kagenui-san, for how long have you been in charge of this job? You've said that you had already been in Europe before they halted the entering and leaving of Japan, but specifically... Had the novel coronavirus already been discovered in Japan by that point?"

It probably wasn't a very meaningful question, but I was still curious. Since Shinobu had finally taken on a humble position, it would be worthless for an argument to break out, so part of my intention had been to read the mood and cut into the conversation—but it was also a good idea to understand exactly when this phenomenon had begun.

The timing of the infection's appearance, or rather, its outbreak.

At what point in the timeline was Suicidemaster hospitalized in this "Corpse Castle"?

"I was called over here before the pandemic. However... Suicidemaster was in this condition even earlier than that."

It was as though she had seen through the intentions behind my question, but Kagenui-san responded all the same—but, even earlier?

"Apparently her health had been pretty bad for a while. Former Heartunderblade. Were you already aware of that?"

"...She never told me directly, though."

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[89] 毒を食らわば皿まで *doku o kurawaba sara made* "If you eat poison, you may as well lick the plate", a phrase meaning that if you've committed a crime, you may as well devote yourself to being a criminal.

It was Shinobu's begrudging way of saying yes.

It was nice to see her being honest, but... Huh?

"Are you saying, when she came to Japan last April, Suicidemaster was already in bad shape?"

"Like I said, it is not that she said so herself. We did not discuss the matter at all. I had already known from before about her anorexia. Yet, being her direct lineage, I could see that she had unmistakably grown weaker, just as Kagenui had seen it."

So, following that unidentifiable "just because" intuition, she dared to compel this journey into occurring—while the infection and so on was beyond her expectations, there had been enough foreshadowing for her to believe that something had happened to her sworn friend.

"Then, by that point, Suicidemaster was already infected with the anti-vampire virus—"

"—Nah, that ain't it. Definitely not. If that were true, the regions with the infection would be much more extensive—including Japan. But by the time I was called down from the North Pole, it was clear that Suicidemaster in her six-year-old form was already showing symptoms."

It was hard to tell when she'd contracted the disease, then...

To try and understand it by forcibly comparing it to the novel coronavirus, then did Suicidemaster, already weak from her unbalanced diet, meet the conditions for the onset of the anti-vampire virus more than other vampires? And that would mean the moment of her infection differed from the onset of her symptoms...

Last April, I thought it would be tactless to listen in on Shinobu and Suicidemaster's conversation and chose not to do so... I myself had not really held any honest conversations with Suicidemaster.

She felt more like the friend of a friend.

Or perhaps the relative of a relative.

What mattered was that I knew nothing about her.

"But I can say this much. At that time, Suicidemaster knew that her death was imminent, and visited Japan to see the face of her sworn

friend, the former Heartunderblade, one last time—she wouldn't say it like that herself, and I'd bet she didn't tell you that at all, but that's a fact."

"....."

At that declaration, Shinobu did not make a particularly surprised face—she probably really hadn't been told that, but it was likely she'd guessed as much by that point last year.

The time of death.

If, in this episode, Shinobu had come to see the moment of her sworn friend's death, then in the previous episode, Suicidemaster had come to see her sworn friend before she died.

So as to not leave any regrets.

"So, if she'd already been infected as of last April, then even if there were no travel restrictions or close surveillance, Suicidemaster wouldn't've made the trip. As long as there was the risk of passing it onto the former Heartunderblade—that'd only be if she was aware of it, but at the very least, the two of you haven't died yet, right?"

It was unthinkable as a clinical trial, and it was unthinkable as expertise, but, well, it was true—although, given that we'd brazenly entered into this infected region, it was possible that that was no longer the case.

"I've heard that the fatality rate is one hundred percent, but what exactly are the symptoms exhibited after having contracted the anti-vampire virus? Apparently you don't turn into ashes..."

"Things start to weaken all over the place, but the most extreme one would be dehydration. You can't take in blood or water, and once you're on the verge of death, you'll end up shriveled like a wrung-out rag."

Dehydration was also a symptom of the novel coronavirus, but since it was primarily a respiratory illness, it didn't go that far—as long as there was no link between the two illnesses, but wait, hold on. What would happen if you were infected with both at the same time?

You wouldn't be able to breathe, and you wouldn't be able to drink water?

We'd put into practice our first doping after a whole year after the careful decision to try and avoid either disease, but hadn't we actually ended up increasing the risk of contracting either of them? The saying went, if you run after two hares, you will catch neither, but rather than that, weren't we being bitten by both of those hares?

"It'd be ideal if there turned out to be viral interference, which made it impossible to be infected by either of them..."

"My master, it is not as though you have ever attained an ideal even once in your life. Kagenui, do you mean to say that, even if the corpse of a vampire does not disappear, they do not preserve their original form?"

"Yep, it's not a pretty sight. This'd be a weird way to put it for a vampire, but they're left mere shadows of their former selves.[90] If you're interested, feel free to take a gander at any of the coffins you like."

Coffins we like...

And, wrung-out rags, huh... As someone with the experience of being wrung out, it was a comparison that hit close to home.

"Then, I shall confirm that rag-like state, not with the corpses, but with Deathy herself,"

said Shinobu, not losing sight of her original goal.

"Does Deathy happen to know that I am here?"

"I did tell her 'bout it, but she's practically comatose, so I dunno if it got through to her... Former Heartunderblade, if you're thinking that donating your own blood will help her get better, then sorry. Like I said, she's incapable of taking in any fluids, not just blood. Even by feeding cups or IV drops, it all gets regurgitated."

"...Does that mean she cannot eat food, either?"

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[90] 見る影もない *miru kage mo nai*, literally "not even a shadow is visible". The figurative meaning is as given, but "shadow" is the key term here with respect to vampires.

"That's right. Though, for the record, it ain't like she's lost her sense of taste or smell—she could sense the taste when we tried giving her tomato juice. But she just couldn't swallow."

Why did she use tomato juice for her example?

Was it because people used to think it was poisonous in the past?

"If she drinks anything, it gets spit back out. Like some foreign substance, she couldn't swallow it down—as if the immune system was working against moisture itself, 'stead of viruses."

Being afraid of water happened to be a symptom of rabies, so it really did feel like a vampire-like symptom... But it felt like a terrifying disease even just thinking about it.

It had been kept from us for the sake of information control, but if I'd heard all those specifics, I probably would have been a bit more hesitant to make the trip here.

"Like how you discover you've contracted the novel coronavirus after losing your sense of taste, vampires will discover they've been infected when they're no longer able to suck blood. In other words, former Heartunderblade, the fact that you've grown to that thirteen-year-old form means that you ain't infected at all. Since it means you got to enjoy sucking the blood of Araragi-kun."

Though, once again, that only held true "three hours ago".

Hm... Speaking of which, with Suicidemaster being quite the gourmet vampire, hadn't she not consumed any real meal-like meals ever since drinking the luxurious blood of "Princess Beauty"? And, last April, in the end...

She'd already been in bad shape by that point... She'd already sensed that her death was imminent... Ah, I felt like things were about to fall into place, but they didn't. Was it because of that notorious thing called jet lag?

"'Twould be hell for the average vampire. Nay, 'twould be hell for anyone. The idea of death by starvation, or death by dehydration—but rest assured. I did not think of attempting to cure Deathy with such

simple methods, not the slightest bit. And this time, I will not suggest the plan of having her drink blood from the Blood Pond Hell, either."

It was doubtful whether or not that was entirely true, but Kagenui-san shrugged off Shinobu's words with a, "Is that so," before continuing with,

"Well then, that's all the precautions. If you'd like to visit your sworn friend now, then go on ahead,"

pointing towards the back of the library with her thumb.

"The demands of our coalition have made it so that only one person is allowed to see her at a time, but there's no point in telling you that, right? You're free to go together."

Was it a guideline to prevent closeness?

The way she was putting it made us sound like outlaws—and she was breaking rules as if it were completely normal, this person. Well, in reality, compared to Kagenui-san on a business trip, we had definitely come to Europe via much more illogical means, and the fact of the matter was that there would have been no reason to come all the way to these ruined countries if we were going to be excluded anyway. However, I felt a bit of hesitation in regards to something other than that guideline—and this was my own personal hesitation, but was it really right for me, a half-hearted presence, to intrude between the reunion of two vampires, two sworn friends?

I felt so out of place that it felt like I was deserving of punishment.

Wouldn't the appropriate thing to do as a twenty-year-old be to read the mood and take a step back, leaving it to the youngsters, or rather, the ones older than six hundred?

Shinobu might be bound to my shadow, but now that she was in her thirteen-year-old mode, it was possible for her to assume some distance from me, much like a cordless telephone and its handset—putting aside whether or not the comparison of cordless phones would, in the Reiwa

era (compared to phones[91]), be conveyed well (compared to landlines[92]). And as those thoughts ran through my mind...

"My master. There is no need for those silly concerns,"

scolded the thirteen-year-old.

Even here.

My life consisted of nothing but being scolded by younger girls.

"If anything, 'twould be easier if you were there with me. If this could be our final meeting, then I would like to formally introduce my master to Deathy."

Well, it was true we'd left things rather uncertain last time. I had just gone with the flow. And Shinobu had wanted to show off a little, too.

"All right. I'll stick with you. Since we only interacted in bits and pieces the other day, I did want to formally give my greetings, too. To your sworn friend."

"Just do not say any weird things, like 'golden-haired loli slave' or 'Araragi Harem'."

She was properly nailing me down, as though driving a stake into my heart.

Plus, the Araragi Harem wasn't even coined by me.

"And untie your twintails."

"My hair isn't even tied in the first place. For now."

"If you can even talk to her when she's in that state, then I'd like it if you can get as much info out of her as possible. Her and I aren't exactly strangers, but I *am* fundamentally her enemy, so obviously she ain't gonna speak her mind with me."

Basically, it was what was known as contract tracing, right?—we'd been given an important, yet difficult, assignment. Perhaps things would be different if I were a medical student, but considering the infectious nature of the anti-vampire virus and Suicidemaster's condition as she

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[91] Appears to be a pun on 令和 *Reiwa* and 電話 *denwa* "phone".

[92] No wordplay here, just an oblique reference to the difference in sound quality between cordless and landline phones. I felt like I had to explain the joke because it seemed unfunny enough for people to wonder if there was meant to be wordplay here.

rested in the throne room, it wasn't like we could hold a particularly long conversation in the first place.

"The hardest thing might be getting her to speak her mind—as Deathy is of the same ilk as me, she is herself a vainglorious vampire. Whether it was six hundred years ago or one year ago, she never once showed any indication of her weaknesses or her weakening."

I see.

That was exactly what I'd expect from a friend of yours.

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I've been complaining about this and that in regards to the pandemic, but in actuality, it was not as though I myself had been infected, nor did I know anyone around me who had been infected. As such, besides the classes of the university, which I'd so laboriously managed to enter, becoming online, I was only able to truly understand the severity of the situation when the things I found enjoyable or the things I was looking forward to werew postponed or cut back or canceled.

It forced me to recognize that the world had changed.

Even as someone who said things like, "I won't make friends, because my strength as a human would decrease," I had still become deeply obliged to the various forms of fun entertainment, to the extent that (to borrow Ononoki-chan's words) they could be prohibited... In that sense, the period of self-restraint could also be construed as a period of being on stand-by.

Or, idle time.

It would be fairly wrong to say that I'd been looking forward to it, but our meeting with the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster, was achieved surprisingly smoothly without being postponed any further—I'd been right on the mark in my assumption that things could proceed pretty quickly when it was Kagenui-san we were dealing with.

Putting aside the question of if things were proceeding more quickly towards death.

Well, both Kagenui-san and Ononoki-chan had only repeated their warnings and words of caution in unison, but they never wanted to get in the way of Shinobu's wishes for a meeting, so it was only a matter of course... It was just that I'd expected we'd be kept waiting a little more, so it was a bit of a surprise.

In other words, it meant that it was possible Suicidemaster did not have enough time left to keep us waiting—but also, it was neither a remote conference nor an online meeting but a fruitful face-to-face

meeting that came to fruition,[93] and the delicate situation made me a little worried.

Compared to the plastic dividers used in restaurants, or the partitions often seen on TV... A much narrower distance was formed by the drapes that hung respectfully between us and the throne, though they were by no means transparent—from what I remembered, it was a partition that resembled the one from when I'd had an audience with "Princess Beauty" in the "Mirror World".

In Japanese terms, it was like a bamboo screen.[94]

It was a partition used in accordance with the convention of upper-class people not showing themselves so easily, but it was also a curtain used as countermeasures for infection—though, in this particular case, it seemed most likely that its biggest function was to serve as the curtain surrounding a hospital bed.

In order to just barely protect one's privacy.

"Ka ka... So you came... It makes me happy, in a tough and cool way. Rola—wait, that's not it. You're not Rola anymore. I gave you a new name... What was it again...?"

If I hadn't heard from Kagenui-san in advance regarding the symptoms of this disease, I would have thought that the voice I heard from behind the sheer fabric came from an elderly person—well, it was true that Suicidemaster was of an age even beyond that of an elderly person, but at least when I'd met her last year, she'd been a young girl no different from Shinobu.

Or rather, she was even younger, at six years old.

That had been an indicator that she'd grown that weak... But the silhouette from behind the curtain was extremely far off from the image of a girl, but more like that of a withered tree.

Or even a decayed tree.

She lay sprawled across the throne, and did not even raise her upper body.

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[93] 実りある *minori aru* "fruitful", 実現 *jitsugen* "realization, actualization". They share the *kanji* 実, which can mean "fruit" or "truth".

[94] 御簾 *misu*, also known as 簾 *sudare*.

She couldn't raise it.

"Yeah... That's right. The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade... That was it."

"...Indeed."

With a hoarse voice, Shinobu agreed.

She did not go out of her way to say that that name had already become a thing of the past—before that, she must have received that much of a shock.

At Suicidemaster's condition.

Not just at her appearance, voice, or silhouette, but also at her response, where even the name she had come up with as her sworn friend's direct progenitor had become uncertain—her memory had become clouded.

Even her consciousness had become clouded.

Though she was putting on a bold front to hide her weakness, it was impossible to conceal, and that had almost left Shinobu at a loss for words.

However, it was Shinobu who put on a bold front in response.

As though she was ignoring the poor condition of her sworn friend...

"I did not expect that I would once again be seeing you in this 'Corpse Castle'. Back then, the both of us were so unbelievably young, were we not?"

she said.

"Yeah... We had nothing but the indiscretions of youth."

Such was Suicidemaster's belabored response.

It was a response that I found hard to judge if Shinobu's words had fully reached her, or if she was simply saying something arbitrary to pretend that she understood.

"For me to return to this castle in this state... Ka ka. It's hilarious. I was born in this 'Corpse Castle', and now I'll die in this 'Corpse Castle'."

"But you have died in places all over the world, have you not?"

“Is that right…?”

At Shinobu’s slightly-too-harsh retort, Suicidemaster only gave an ambiguous response—it had only been a couple of exchanges, but it was already too hard to watch.

It felt like my heart was tightening.

The symptoms were completely different from those of the novel coronavirus, but it felt like I was personally witnessing how terrifying an infectious disease could be—even through the partition, it came across to me more than enough.

Regardless of what had been in between, being in front of “Princess Beauty” in the “Mirror World” or in heaven had also made me tremble excessively… I’d been thinking that I didn’t want to intrude upon the two vampires’ rendezvous, but this wasn’t an atmosphere in which I could have cut in in the first place. There was no room to feel consideration or alienation. I could only stay silent.

“I would like to ask this just in case, Deathy,”

said Shinobu.

Perhaps she’d regained her composure, as I couldn’t feel her wavering heart even through our link—I thought she was putting on a bold front, but maybe she had truly managed to keep her heart from wavering.

The fact that she’d lived for six hundred years did mean that she held six hundred years’ worth of experience.

She might have already known this was the case from the hunch she’d had in Japan—rather than a hunch, it might have been a premonition.

“Do you want any help?”

“Nah.”

Even that immediate reply was frail. Pitiful.

Full of helplessness.

“Honestly, it’d be great if you left as soon as possible—I don’t wanna risk infecting you. Not you, or your thrall.”

It seemed she hadn't overlooked my presence here, as Suicidemaster said so in acknowledgement—so she was fully aware of the state that she was in.

She was capable of informed consent.

"I've experienced loads of different causes of death, but I think dying from this infection will complete the set. I don't have even an ounce of regret, or an ounce of leftovers to eat.[95] As someone worthy of certain death, I'm satisfied having died ten thousand deaths.[96] Just like my other name says."

"...I see."

"What... You doubting me?"

"No, there is no room for reasonable doubt. After all, both you and I have lived for far too long. If anything, 'twould have been better if the two of us died six hundred years ago."

"Ka ka... Exactly. But there's no need for you to die, too. For now, anyway. I'm grateful that you came all the way from that island country in the Far East to see me, but I really have no regrets. If you don't mind, I'll be one step ahead of you in getting some peace."

As Suicidemaster said that, her tone of voice did not sound peaceful in the slightest—and Shinobu said, "Well, unlike me, you do not flail about in an effort to survive, eh?" as she shrugged her shoulders.

"Very different from me, who failed to die completely. I have decided to live in that shame, and I have made my peace with that... Yet, 'tis not a way of life I would particularly recommend."

"Weeell... I would've gone with that, too, if I could. So I'd like to say my thanks to that thrall of yours. Thank you for enslaving Rola."

I remained silent, but oh. She'd said her thanks to me.

To me.

It hadn't immediately struck me that Rola was Shinobu's name when she'd been human, so I couldn't respond right away, and I wasn't even sure how I could respond after being thanked like that—if

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[95] 悔い *kui* "regret", 食い残し *kuinokoshi* "leftovers".

[96] 万死 *banshi* "certain death", translated as "death-certain" in Deathtopia's alias, can literally mean "ten thousand deaths".

anything, what I'd done to Shinobu was an act of barbarism that should've drawn the ire of her sworn friend—but I managed to say,

"I'd like to thank you, too, for allowing me to meet Shinobu—"

in a panic.

At this point, it had become something like greeting the parents before marriage... Well, they *were* sworn friends, and Suicidemaster was something like a guardian to Shinobu, so perhaps that impression was not entirely off-base.

Normally, this should have been a formality performed in the April of last year, but even so, you could say it was a transfer of authority that likely could not have occurred if it weren't for this pandemic.

If she had not been rendered so powerless, it would have been impossible for me to exchange such pleasantries with Suicidemaster—with a genuine oddity.

In any case, I felt nothing but gratitude.

Precisely because Suicidemaster had turned "Princess Beauty" into a vampire, I was able to meet her during that spring break, about six hundred years later.

"Thinking about how I could've made the same mistake with Kissshot as I did with Tropicalesque... Just dying wouldn't be enough for my atonement. But it seems like I don't need to worry there."

Tropicalesque... The butler.

The vampire that served as caretaker of this "Corpse Castle".

"I shall never become like him. I cannot. Though he was a slave, Tropicalesque was a vampire that enjoyed taking the royal road, despite not being royalty."

"Seriously. That slave was just too much for me—ka ka. Guess I can finally get to go and apologize to him. Really kept him waiting, huh."

...As far as I knew, there was no concept of the "afterlife" for oddities. It was only humans that could fall down to hell, and it was only humans that could ascend to heaven—or so it should have been, but, well, perhaps it depended on the country or culture or linguistic area.

It would be extremely tasteless of me to call it out right now.

The vampire that Shinobu said she had killed... The oddity that was killed, not by her as the "Oddity Slayer", but by her as "Princess Beauty".

If he was a vampire that enjoyed taking the royal road, then if he had lived to the present day, would he have been someone that took on the full brunt of this pandemic?

No, if he really did enjoy taking the royal road, then there's no way he would have lived for over six hundred years... Even if his physical body could hold up, he wouldn't be able to withstand the erosion of his mind. The only ones capable of withstanding that would be heretical vampires like Shinobu and Suicidemaster.

They really were sworn friends.

Though one part of those heretics was about to be brought to sleep.

The sleep of death.

"So? Kissy. Didn't Kagenui tell you to ask me something?[97] You'd better ask me quickly... If you don't fulfill your role, you won't be able to cut this meeting short, even if you wanted to."

"If it is possible, I would like to keep this conversation going for about a hundred more years."

"Give up on that."

"How hilarious, to tell me to give up on something. Now that we have met, it would not matter to me in the slightest if I were to break the promise with that vampire hunter. Although, I suppose I should try to save face here."

Shinobu was taking on a haughty attitude—sorry to say this while you're trying to act cool, but I'd like it if you did that, too. I could understand getting big-headed after meeting with your sworn friend, but don't forget that breaking our promise with Kagenui-san here meant losing our means of transportation home.

Our outing was still an outing until we made it back home.

"Well, for me... It'd be nice if I could give you, my closest friend, this achievement as a parting gift, or as a form of inheritance, but

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[97] Like Shinobu, Deathtopia refers to Kagenui using the katakana カゲヌイ.

unfortunately, I'm not trying to keep it a secret. I seriously don't know... I don't know when or where I was infected."

I don't have a clue.

So said the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, and I didn't sense any falsehoods in her words—or rather, I sensed that, as a vampire on the verge of death, she didn't even possess the strength to tell any lies.

Her remaining lives were zero.

"That's what I told Kagenui... But unfortunately, she doesn't really trust me right now. If I do have any regrets, it's that I'll be dying while still on the bad side of that specialist..."

Was that supposed to be a joke, as opposed to a lie?

Had she mustered all her strength to crack a joke?

In the first place, Kagenui-san treated all immortal oddities as evil, so I didn't think she hated Suicidemaster for personal reasons... However, it was also true that she had enlisted our help because she thought there were still secrets to uncover.

If it were the case that, even unintentionally, she was still keeping something hidden...

"Even if you do not know when you were infected, do you not know the last moment in which you were certainly not infected?"

Despite all the bad-mouthing, it seemed she still planned on doing her job, as Shinobu posed that question—when was the last moment she was certainly not infected? Though it was likely hard to say for sure, given the incubation period or the asymptomatic period—

"Last year, when I went to Japan to visit you, I'm pretty sure there weren't any problems. Not that I was in tip-top shape... Honestly, I was already thinking 'I'm about to die soon' by that point. But I was assuming it would end up being death by starvation. Never thought it'd be a disease like this."

So it had been true that she had come to visit Shinobu after having foreseen her own death—not that she herself had said so, but, well, some things went without saying.

“And what happened after you were deported by Kagenui? I know you must be tired of these questions, but I cannot just refrain from asking.”

“I wandered around under the hunters’ supervision… Even so, it’s not like I was able to get around much. But apparently, the routes I took ended up exactly tracing the map of infection for the pandemic—it’s fairly likely I was patient zero.”

Patient zero—so that was why she was being quarantined like this, in such a special way. The anti-vampire virus, with a fatality rate of almost one hundred percent—the fact that she was an exception indicated by that “almost” was probably part of why she’d become a subject of research.

For now, anyway.

Though she was about to be an exception no longer.

However, whether she was the first or the second or even the hundredth or the ten thousandth patient to be infected, it wasn’t really a competition, and there wasn’t really any meaning to the number—if anything, since Suicidemaster had been under the supervision of specialists since her deportation, they should have a complete understanding of the route of infection.

They’d know more details than Suicidemaster herself, what with her foggy recollection—nevertheless, the origin of this illness was still unknown.

And that was what was so strange.

“Is it okay if I ask a question, too?”

I wasn’t sure if she could see me from behind the sheer fabric, but I raised my hand to ask Suicidemaster a question.

“This might have less to do with the infection and more to do with the ecology of vampires, but… What is it really like for vampire communities? I get all the stuff with thralls and slaves, but how often is it the case that vampires become friends, like with you two?”

“‘Tis nonexistent.”

Perhaps she was showing consideration so as to not place extra burden on her sworn friend, but it was Shinobu that answered my question born from ignorance.

"There is a strong awareness of each vampire having their own domain. And because they can produce thralls through something like parthenogenesis, there is no meaning to forming a group or a society. As such, they are not very social creatures. Our association comes from the fact that Deathy had formed friendly relations with me when I was still human."

I see.

It was true that, after she'd become a vampire, Shinobu had parted ways with Suicidemaster, and they hadn't seen each other again for six hundred years—strictly speaking, they had only reunited after Shinobu was no longer a vampire.

Well, what I had really wanted to know was, even if Suicidemaster really had been a super-spreader, then how exactly would she have spread this contagion to the other vampires scattered across Europe?

Social distancing measures differed from country to country, but even if this disease were spread by airborne transmission, which had a wider range than droplet transmission, it wouldn't have been able to spread to any other vampires if they hadn't been in that range, right...?

Closeness—secrets.[98]

"I... I wasn't exactly well-connected. It was actually a surprise to me to learn that there were so many vampires still alive."

She had said something similar to Shinobu.

To the very end, they were like birds of a feather that flocked together—in that case, it was probably true when she said she wasn't well-connected. But that meant the question of how the infection had even spread lingered even more strongly.

Well, even if you avoided the Three Closes or avoided dining together, epidemics became epidemics because they spread when they did—this was more about the novel coronavirus, but the fact that there

[98] 密 *mitsu* "closeness" (referring to the "Three Closes"), and 秘密 *himitsu* "secret".

were no one-hundred-percent perfect countermeasures surely applied to every epidemic.

As if it was possible to dodge microscopic particles.

It wasn't even a game of dodgeball.

"If I ended up eradicating the race of vampires, who were just barely scraping by, then it would truly be heartbreaking. I'd like to apologize by offering my life."

"We all know you are not so admirable."

"But it's true that I don't want to get you infected. Guess the tips of my fangs really have grown dull. Maybe you wouldn't get infected in your current state, but still, I want you to take care."

Normally, the one being told, "Take care," should have been Suicidemaster on her sickbed, but she'd said so all the same.

"There's also the fact that I don't wanna show any more of my shriveled-up self. If possible, I'd like for you to remember me as being tough and cool to the very end."

"'Tis not as though you have ever shown me the cool side of yourself. As far as I have seen, you were always dying in some way or another."

Saying that and without taking a step closer to the throne, Shinobu turned on her heel—perhaps it was the style of those with the Oshino name to not say any parting words.

Or.

Perhaps she intended to return to this audience chamber once again.

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It probably didn't have much to do with the fact that this castle belonged to a gourmet vampire who thought she'd die of starvation, but the dining room (?) of the "Corpse Castle" had an oppressive atmosphere to it—I myself had had some experience spending my days in some ruins for about two weeks, but when it ended up being the ruins of a castle, it no longer became something I could make light of.

And included in that oppressive atmosphere was the massive table that you might even be able to play curling on, as well as the dinner menu placed on top.

"It's some food delivery to make your stay more comfortable,"

said Ononoki-chan.

With a composed face.

She'd been told to take a break, but while Shinobu and I were spending our maximum allotted time meeting with Suicidemaster, Ononoki-chan apparently had gone on another flight to San Sebastian—it was a lavish takeout spread, delivered by a tween-girl Uber Eats.

It might be pretty close to delivery by drone.

Unlike the throne room, there were no plastic dividers or partitions, but with a dining room this spacious, it would be easy to maintain the proper amount of distance. We would be able to dine together while conversing without fear of infection.

The risk of infection was supposed to be equal for all people regardless of any disparity in wealth, but when it came to things like this, a clear gap could be seen.

The same way my isolation at home was different from Oikura's isolation at home.

Well, now that I was thinking about it, I hadn't had anything to eat for quite a while (as ONK Airlines was, not a low-cost, but a no-cost carrier, there were no in-flight meals)—and so that I myself didn't die from starvation, I would partake without reservations.

For a short period of time, my vampirism had been boosted, so I hadn't been feeling any hunger. But I had suddenly been hit with a wave of tiredness, so it was probably fine to indulge in some foreign cuisine right now.

"—And so, we didn't manage to get any important information out of Suicidemaster. I'm sorry we couldn't be of more help."

Doing my best to be well-mannered despite my lack of manners, I reported to Kagenui-san—Shinobu had gone completely silent after the meeting with her sworn friend, so I was speaking for her.

That was my part to play.

"Well, that was about what I expected. But even so, it's good that Suicidemaster spoke to you at all. Must've lifted her spirits to see that her friend came to visit."

After that, Kagenui-san said, "Araragi-kun, now that you've turned twenty, how about a glass of wine?" to offer me a drink—it would have been rather meaningful to drink with an adult who'd known me since I was underaged, but I politely declined.

If I were to drink now, I would surely be a bad drunk.

I wouldn't want my first taste of alcohol to end like that.

"Was she really in high spirits…? It didn't really seem that way…"

If it was relatively speaking, then that must mean that she had weakened by that much.

"Rather than that, I'd like to hear your honest thoughts. Araragi-kun, and the former Heartunderblade. What impression did you get from the Suicidemaster behind the curtain?"

Impression—in other words, intuition, huh?

Well, we'd come all the way to Europe following that intuition, so rather than us amateurs trying to logically analyze things in a weird way, this was probably more pertinent.

"If you hadn't told me in advance that the main symptom was dehydration, then I would've said she seemed like she was wasting away from old age."

I wasn't sure if that was the right way to express it, or if it was relevant even if it was right, but I stated my thoughts anyway without being choosy with my words.

Not that it was meant to be a medical diagnosis...

"I have a grandfather and a grandmother myself, but it was like she was talking like people from that generation. Of course, Suicidemaster is far older than my grandparents—"

Naturally, I hadn't seen my grandparents for quite some time. To the point of making me feel unworthy as their grandson. Well, as you may have guessed, I wasn't a very cute grandson, so I had already been somewhat estranged from them even before the pandemic, but my cute little sisters were still in close contact even now—that form of closeness was allowed.

"Indeed. She seemed more lively than my hunch had led me to believe, but rather than having weakened, it felt as though she had declined from age. Deathy was someone who had always shown contempt for suicide, so it really left me speechless when she so openly discussed her suicidal thoughts."

Perhaps because she was her sworn friend, Shinobu's solemn words showed no modesty—it was a level of unreservedness that made me think, "Who are you to say that?" As a vampire who came to Japan in search of a place to die... Although, there was a difference between "wanting to kill oneself" and "wanting to die".

"So she's eager to die, eh? Well, the Yoshino cherry can be traced back to a single tree, so it's kinda like it blooms at the same time all over the world."

That was Kagenui-san's viewpoint.

Speaking of which, from that spring break in which I was turned into a vampire by Shinobu, I remembered having held a desire to kill myself in the physical education storage shed of Naoetsu High, embarrassing as it was to speak of it now—needless to say, the first thrall of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, Shishirui Seishirou, was the same.

Suicide genes…

"It's the cause of death for ninety percent of vampires. But there ain't nothing to be embarrassed about, Araragi-kun. Not embarrassing at all to want to die by your own hand."

Oh, that was something I didn't expect to hear from Kagenui-san—she'd always felt like the kind of character that would dismiss the decision to kill yourself as a sign of weakness.

"Nah, nah. Course, I wouldn't say that killing yourself is a sign of strength, but in Japan, there was once a time where it was honorable to commit *seppuku*, right?"

In that very storage shed, Hanekawa Tsubasa had declared to me that the act of suicide was a sin, which was why I'd stopped my thoughts of suicide—but aha, so there was that way of seeing things, too.

I wasn't sure if it was ethical to say this in the current context, and it was completely different from the suicidal ideations displayed by Shinobu or me or Suicidemaster, but given the reports of the increasing number of suicides during the unstable climate of the pandemic, perhaps the feeling of "wanting to die" was not something to be blamed or ashamed of in and of itself.

It was not something to lower your self-evaluation over.

It was an emotion that was natural to feel.

It might be weakness or clumsiness, but it certainly wasn't bad.

Just like how I didn't know any infected people near me, I also didn't know of any suicides near me either, so my words could only come from shallow understanding. But even if suicide were a sin, I wanted to get the idea that it was not bad, or I felt like I would err in judgment in the future.

"That's right. It ain't bad—but it ain't good, either."

Nor is it correct.

So spoke Kagenui-san, in a bit of a reversal.

Did this person ever think thoughts of "wanting to die"? Well, there was a time when Kagenui-san was a college student, after all.

She must have been a high school student, too, at one point.

“Basically, does that mean Suicidemaster has grown tired of fighting her illness and is seeking euthanasia? Did she say something like that? Shino-nee.”

To Ononoki-chan’s question, Shinobu responded with, “How over-familiar. Who are you calling Shino-nee?” (Perhaps it was Ononoki-chan’s way of trying to loosen up the tension, and if so, it was a nice play from her.) And then,

“She did not say anything about euthanasia, but it did seem like she wanted to die of natural causes,”

responded Shino-nee.

That level of nuance was something I myself hadn’t managed to take in, but it was natural that her sworn friend had.

“‘Tis far from hospice care, but it felt like she would refuse any further treatment to prolong her life. For being the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, accustomed to dying in careless ways, she seemed to be in anguish over being unable to die like other vampires.”

“Survivor’s guilt?”

“‘Tis not just from this epidemic. The fact that she herself was living on, while those of the same race continued to die around her, must have been gnawing away at her mind and body for quite some time—including the death of her thrall, Tropicalesque.”

Thinking about it, even his death was something like suicide—said Shinobu, as though she was speaking about herself.

Perhaps it really was about herself, too.

Having been the one to bring Shishirui Seishirou to his death.

“It’d be a problem if she went and died, though. To speak for the self-interest of the human side, if we can’t develop a cure for the anti-vampire virus through this true ancestor, who remains the sole case of not dying despite having the heaviest symptoms, then at this rate, vampires really will be eradicated.”

“As expected. And that would be bad for business, correct?”

A snide remark from Shinobu.

Though it was closer to venting her anger.

"More like the conservation of vermin. We'd go and exterminate them if there were too many of them,"

parried Kagenui-san.

From her response, it didn't seem like this was a job that Kagenui-san personally wanted—if there was anything that was as expected, it would be this.

"The conservation of the ecosystem—or I guess it's the conversation of the corpse-system?[99] Well, even for smallpox, a disease that humanity has conquered, the virus is still securely stored in some laboratory, after all."

Really.

Well, I figured that was more like preserving a specimen for if it ever became relevant, but I imagined anyone would be able to understand the feeling of "wanting to hold onto something worthless that might disappear completely".

If vampires were to fall to ruin, then it would cause the balance of the oddity world (?) to collapse. So for specialists, it would have been a poor evaluation of their priorities if that situation were to end up giving birth to monstrous apparitions even more dangerous to humanity.

"To tell you the truth, it was pretty convenient to have vampires throwing their weight around while being oddities we can keep in check."

"Who are you saying are oddities you can keep in check?"

Shinobu objected to that statement, but she didn't say any more—it seemed she was aware of her contentment with the current situation, in which she was completely being kept in check.

Even the King of Oddities could lose face.

And though she called it the conservation of the ecosystem, the idea of increasing or decreasing the count of living beings, or keeping the balance or keeping them under control—doing such things could be

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[99] 生態系 *seitaikei* "ecosystem". 生態 *seitai*, which means "mode of life", is replaced with 死体 *shitai*, or "corpse".

considered arrogant of humanity... Though, rather than it being an advanced ethical problem, there was the pressing matter that, if they didn't do so, humanity could be placed on the brink of collapse.

Even if humans shouldn't take part in the natural world, that didn't mean we could just leave the novel coronavirus alone—though viruses weren't living beings at all.

Balance... Neutrality.

"They aren't living beings. You can't touch them. You can't see them with the naked eye. Viruses are almost like oddities, aren't they?"

"In fact, the Black Death, which was connected to the legend of vampires, was considered an apparition, you know?"

"Though the Black Death wasn't a virus."

Really?

It was seriously hard to remember the definitions of everything.

"In any case, it would be a problem for all of you if Deathy were to die now, correct?"

"Not only is she the symbol of this epidemic, she's also a living witness of the days gone by, y'know. There's tons of questions about history we'd like to ask her about. Hospitalizing her here like this is also kinda like a witness protection program—though you'd need to be a person to be a witness."[100]

A living witness of the bubonic plague, cholera, and smallpox.

And also a living witness of wars and natural disasters.

If so, then Shinobu could also be considered one, but in her case, Shinobu was formerly a princess and currently a young girl, so she was fairly ignorant of the ways of the world for a six-hundred-year-old.

It would be no wonder if they thought her incapable of providing witness testimony.

"Hmph. If my statements cannot be relied upon, then 'twould be the same for Deathy—but anyway, Kagenui. Is it fine to not perform a PCR test or something to verify that we have not been infected?"

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[100] 証人 *shounin* "witness" contains the *kanji* for 人 "person".

Resting her chin in her hands as though out of boredom, Shinobu moved on to a new subject. Though it was bad manners, it displayed the dignity of a former princess, and the thirteen-year-old seemed well-suited to the castle interior.

"In the first place, my master and I were not called here to take part in the investigation, but to serve as canopy beds, were we not?"

"I'm guessin' you mean guinea pigs."[101]

A canopy bed is more like the throne surrounded by the curtain, said Kagenui-san—that would certainly tarnish the former princess's dignity.

"Well, I won't deny it. Or rather, I'll completely confirm it. While the two of you stay in this castle, I'd like it if you'd let us observe you—if you'll get infected, if you'll exhibit symptoms, how long it takes for you to exhibit symptoms, and all that. Though I won't force you."

Not that she really needed to force us in these circumstances.

We were in a lockdown in which we had no choice but to agree. If we simply tried to leave, we'd probably be hit by not a vampire punch, but an *onmyouji* punch.

Though I wasn't feeling anything at the moment, there was still the fear that we'd already been infected the moment we stepped foot into the remains of the Acerola Kingdom (temp.), even before meeting with Suicidemaster—and, with the possibility of the formation of an anti-vampire virus variant that could infect other oddities, I couldn't exactly just go straight back to my beloved hometown full of *yokai*.

"Putting Ononoki aside—Kagenui, from the fact that you've been permanently stationed in this 'Corpse Castle', would it be safe to assume that no matter how the anti-vampire virus mutates, 'twill never come to affect humans?"

"'Never' is a strong word. But I can guarantee that it's about as unlikely as vampires being infected with the novel coronavirus—I guess?"

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[101] Shinobu says ベルベット *berubetto* "velvet" when she means モルモット *morumotto* "guinea pig", with Kagenui's next line actually being "Velvet is more like the curtain surrounding the throne". "Canopy bed" and "guinea pig" are a stretch, but passable for the extended joke.

“How sloppy. Though it pertains directly to your life and death.”

“I’m just doin’ it because it’s my job.”

The specialist on a business trip was speaking like a veteran who had served for quite some time—or perhaps a combat medic who had done so.

Despite her unwillingness, that’s what made her a professional.

Losing your job due to the pandemic, or having no choice but to keep working in spite of the pandemic—both were equally distressing.

However, it seems Shinobu’s point was not simply to test Kagenui-san’s resolve, as she asked,

“Basically, if my master were to return to being human, then would he be able to completely avoid the threat of this infection with a hundred percent fatality rate?”

as a follow-up question.

“Shinobu, that’s—”

“‘Tis just in theory. There is a difference between being considerate and not thinking about it at all. If you were to get infected, my master, and ended up on the verge of death, then I would like to explore if that solution is available.”

It was a form of treatment completely different from the ones that Kagenui-san had explored with Suicidemaster and the other vampires, though it was restricted to only me. But, at the suggestion of a potential means of survival from the incurable illness affecting immortal beings—

"……”

Kagenui-san was silent for a short period.

It seemed it was a treatment plan worth considering.

However, the plan thought up by Shinobu “in theory” had some huge holes, as all her plans did as far as I could remember. I could even say it was a plan made up entirely of holes.

“If we do that, then you’ll die. In order for me to return to being human, your fate is limited to two options—either you completely die, or you completely return to being a vampire.”

The former she had tried during that hellish spring break, and for the latter, Gaen-san had tried it on us—however, if we were to attempt the latter option in the midst of this pandemic, she would fall victim to the fatality rate of one hundred percent.

The diverging routes of the flowchart would quickly reconverge, and Shinobu's death would be inevitable.

"So, 'tis fine if I am to die regardless. Rather than the both of us dying, would it not be better for you to live on?"

"There's also the viewpoint that, rather than dying alone, it's better for us to die together. If you were to die tomorrow, I'm fine with my life lasting until tomorrow, too."

"What a nostalgic line."

But perhaps Shinobu had thought the same. Better together than alone.

If her way of thinking was born from an unconscious desire to die together with her sworn friend, rather than leaving her to die alone—suicide genes, and suicidal ideation.

"The two of you sure are extreme,"

said Ononoki-chan.

In a monotone that completely ignored the once-again tense atmosphere.

Or, maybe it was in a monotone because she'd recognized the tense atmosphere.

"How annoying you are. Do not just refer to me as 'you'."[102]

"Then, Shino-nee."

"Stop with the Shino-nee, too. Show some respect."

"Speaking as a corpse doll, I think you're going overboard by thinking, 'It's fine if I die'. 'Wanting to die' may be an extremely natural physiological response for living beings, but 'It's fine if I die' is just abandoning your life. It's not something worth praising, and I would go so far as to say that it's bad."

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[102] Yotsugi refers to them using お前達 *omae-tachi* "you (plural)". お前 *omae* is a word for "you" with a very casual (and potentially disrespectful) vibe.

At least, there's nothing sincere about it.

And, after being told that, it was hard to refute—accepting that there was a risk of death ran counter to the thought of "It's fine if I die".

Similarly, "I want to be at peace" differed from "I don't care what happens".

"There's been a trend of seeing the pandemic as a time of opportunity, but I don't want people to see it as an opportunity to give up on something difficult."

How strict of you.

Well, it wasn't like I didn't get what she was trying to say, but at the same time, it wasn't necessarily negative for, say, a bank to use this opportunity to write off bad debts. But even still, it was different when a long-lived race, having grown tired of living, went to look for a place to die during this pandemic as opposed to a means of survival.

It'd be troublesome if the vampires decided they wanted to downsize using that as an excuse... If survivor's guilt was what reignited Shinobu's suicidal thoughts upon visiting this "Corpse Castle", then it was a situation that required the utmost caution.

That synchronicity was dangerous.

Not to mention it was double the illness if you counted her homesickness from visiting her homeland—I needed to be on the alert for myself, too. As had been pointed out, I was absolutely the kind of guy that would fall into the thought patterns of "It's fine if I die".

"'If I can go on a date with Hanekawa, it's fine if I die,' or 'If I can get married to Hachikuji, it's fine if I die,' or 'If I can reconcile with Oikura, it's fine if I die'... It's something I say way too easily, huh."

"With that line-up, I feel I have no need to be concerned about you dying at your own hands, my master."

Did she mean that I would likely be killed by Oikura, instead?

"If Ononoki-chan can come back to my parents' home once more as a freeloader, it's fine if I die."

"Don't just nonchalantly express how you feel about me."

Your feelings are heavier than any illness,[103] said Ononoki-chan, and with that, we returned to the main topic.

"It's definitely too extreme to think about it in terms of living and dying... For a simpler example, I set a goal to make lots of friends while I was in university, but that was all ruined by the pandemic and taking remote classes and having to stay at my parents' home. But even so, that doesn't mean I should take advantage of the situation to suspend my project to make a hundred friends, right?"

"What a sad-sounding project. Incidentally, how many friends did you reach?"

For some reason, Kagenui-san was showing interest in my university life... Was it because her colleagues had all become dropouts?

Though I didn't really want to be grouped with the likes of Oshino or Kaiki.

"Only one so far."

"You'd better go and rework that project of yours, regardless of the pandemic. You're nothing like the likes of Oshino-kun or Kaiki-kun. What've you been doin' for the past year? Go and repeat the year!"

"It's been only one friend from within the university, but since I got into university, I've made lots of high-schooler friends. It feels like a dream to be getting along with a bunch of sports-minded athletes, but right now, all the members of Naoetsu High's girls' basketball team are my friends."

"There's definitely someone on that team that doesn't think the same way."

"Also, I've made friends with an elementary school kid who'd been kidnapped..."

"You sure haven't grown at all."

How scathing.

But a completely accurate assessment.

Putting aside my own sad project, under the same context, I realized it might be necessary to keep watch over my irreconcilable

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[103] 想い *omoi* "thoughts, feelings", 重い *omoi* "heavy, weighty".

childhood friend Oikura Sodachi so she didn't bring up the topic of quitting university—keep watch so she didn't withdraw.[104]

Unlike me, who'd lived a fairly blessed life, Oikura had to bear the burden of paying her own tuition... She didn't enter university with some cheeky motivation like "wanting to be in the same university as her boyfriend", but with the resolution to get her life back on track, so it would really be a waste if she were to lose heart now.

I would need to provoke her... That is, support her well.

"I guess the fact that you can recognize how blessed you've been is a sign of your growth, *oni* onii-chan. Is it because you've met a lot of different people, even if you weren't able to make friends with them? If so, there was meaning after all in you moving onto university with impure motives."

"Yeah. If Oikura is able to graduate safely, then it's fine if I die."

"What a nuisance you are to your childhood friend. And what a nuisance the novel coronavirus is."

It felt pretty fresh to call the novel coronavirus a "nuisance".

What would Corona-san say if it had a will of its own, even if it wasn't alive?

"Anyway, Shinobu, the plan of avoiding any risk by turning me back into a human is something you don't need to think about at all. If you have time to think about that, you may as well think about ways to treat that sworn friend of yours."

"Though, she herself has rejected it. She has said she does not need help."

In the same way you have rejected my plan just now, said Shinobu.

She was making the irony clear.

"'Tis hard for me to get across my sincerity to her."

"That's because you don't look after yourself. Even Suicidemaster knows that, if she were to ask for help even as lip service, you'd do anything to try and help. That's why she refused you point-blank."

"How annoying. I do not need you to lecture me."

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[104] 中止 *chuushi* "discontinuance", 注視 *chuushi* "keeping watch over".

“Basically, your help is just a nuisance.”

“Huh? You were not lecturing me, but simply bad-mouthing me…?”

In the first place, if I were to return to being human, then it would just increase my risk of being infected by the novel coronavirus… It was true that the fatality rate would fall, but the act of returning to Japan in and of itself would become difficult. It wouldn’t be as if my life depended on it, but as a stowaway, I would have to go through an even longer period of quarantine…

There were a wide range of issues.

It felt like I would end up sweating waterfalls.

“There’s no need to overthink it, because there’s only so much that you can do by yourself, *oni* onii-chan. What’s necessary is not your own strength, but everybody’s cooperation, so don’t get too carried away. They say that if the wind blows, the bucket makers prosper, so you may as well just keep in mind that if the wind blows, viruses will spread.”[105]

"……"

Was she just not good at backing me up on these things?

Even so, I did honestly feel that Ononoki-chan’s words reassured me in a way—just like how no countermeasures could fully eliminate the risk of infection, no amount of care would fully eliminate the risk of infecting others.

Ononoki-chan herself, after having repeated so many of those hopping flights, could already be afflicted with a variant of the anti-vampire virus.

It wasn’t advisable to experience pointless frustration on a regular basis. If taken too far, it would just become an act of self-harm.

“Besides, I was never going to poke my nose into how vampires feel about life and death. If you’re going to insist on committing double suicide with your sworn friend, I’m not going to stop you.”

“Please stop her, Ononoki-chan.”

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[105] 風が吹けば桶屋が儲かる *kaze ga fukeba okeya ga moukaru* “If the wind blows, the bucket makers prosper”. An idiom meaning any event can have unexpected consequences.

I turned to Kagenui-san.

"Practically speaking, how long do you expect for us to be monitored as research specimens?" I asked. "It seems like the plan I came up with, to resolve everything and return home immediately, is already impossible... No matter how blessed I've been, I can't exactly be away from home for too long of a period."

"You really came up with a plan to return home immediately? Just what I'd expect from the former Heartunderblade's thrall."

It was a nostalgic way of being referred to, at just the right moment.

You could say it was an appropriate moniker, given my vampirism had been boosted right now.

"Also, it seems like it would be difficult to take my online classes from this abandoned castle, so if you could provide even a rough estimate, it would be a big help."

"Kinda hard to guess, but I wouldn't want you to have to drop out, either, Araragi-kun. Gaen-senpai told me that it was fine to kill you, but I'm forbidden from interfering with your studies."

Eh? She'd been told that it was fine to kill me...? By Gaen-san? Seriously, by *that* Gaen-san?

What exactly was the extent of her anger towards me?

Well, if it was forbidden to interfere with my studies, then that technically rendered the previous clause null and void... But it had shaken me up a bit.

She really was good at making me feel suffocated.

"Let's say it'll be about a month? For how long the two of you can stay as guests here. Apparently, Japan's state of emergency was declared with that as the estimate, too, so it all fits perfectly."

What was perfect about that...?

Also, we shouldn't forget the fact that states of emergency or lockdowns could be extended for any reason, and not just in Japan.

Even though Ononoki-chan had gone all the way to San Sebastian to provide us this luxurious Spanish cuisine, it was hard to enjoy any of

it, as though I was consuming nothing but artificial food dyes—and, in an era where using such expressions made it necessary to doubt whether or not I'd developed a taste disorder, I certainly couldn't escape that anxiety.

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With that, I found myself staying in this abandoned castle for one month, which was a length of time not as short as I'd hoped, but not as long as I'd expected—considering that this form of isolation included all-you-can-eat food delivery from every part of Europe, it didn't seem too uncomfortable. Then again, in this "Corpse Castle" Hotel, where you couldn't even expect phone lines, let alone Wi-Fi, there was no way for me to get in contact with my friends and family.

Therefore, in order to send a message to the former Fire Sisters with my excuse for leaving the house for so long, I ended up once again grabbing onto the tween girl's back—I really was the poster child of the modern era, to go to such lengths to get a signal for my phone.

I couldn't detach myself from worldly affairs.

And I couldn't detach myself from the tween girl's back, either.

It was a short flight to a location somewhere near the border of Romania, the same place Kagenui-san had received my video call (which had led to me flying headfirst into the flames)—incidentally, Shinobu had returned to my shadow after the meal. Apparently, maintaining her thirteen-year-old physical form depleted that much more of her stamina. Doping really wasn't as convenient as it sounded. But even so, it would be ridiculous to have our immunity lowered at this point, so I decided to let her get some rest.

Since I'd come all this way, I figured it would be nice to enjoy a video call with my sisters, too, but there was a good chance someone as dumb as me would get found out by the background scenery (I dunno about the older one, but the younger one couldn't be fooled), so it ended with a text message—I was simply transmitting the contents of the message that I'd prepared in advance.

"But still, the likelihood is just too low for it to be a coincidence that Kagenui-san just happened to be here at the same time I just happened to give her a call. Was it really not one of Gaen-san's schemes, Ononoki-chan?"

"Even the onee-san that knows everything can't go as far as controlling the timing of when you make calls, *oni* onii-chan—and the actions of my onee-chan are just as uncontrollable."

Well, that was for sure.

It was because Kagenui-san was too much even for Gaen-san that I had decided to rely on her—though it had pushed me down an unexpected path as a result.

That said, it was mathematically impossible for a low probability multiplied by a low probability to produce a high probability. It was nothing like multiplying two negative numbers to make a positive number.

"I'm only saying this now because Shinobu-nee-san's asleep, but it could be a form of telepathy. Between vampires—Suicidemaster could have sensed that onee-chan left the castle to receive communications, so she sent a message for help to her sworn friend via telepathy. And the former Heartunderblade received that message in the form of inspiration. That would make it believable."

"...She asked for help? I mean, I more or less get the possibility of telepathy between vampires, but... When we met with her, she very clearly stated that she didn't need help."

"With her clouded mind in a comatose state, she could have inadvertently let out her true feelings as though she was sleep-talking. Well, it's not like I have any evidence for this. I'm just talking to fill the silence, so don't worry about it. Don't take it too seriously."

So our relationship had grown so distant that she felt the need to fill the silence with conversation... It hadn't even been a year since Ononoki-chan left the Araragi household, but it felt like she was trying to distance herself too much from me.

But, well, even taking it with a grain of salt, her idea held some merit—as a hypothesis suggesting that this event could serve as an indicator of something more. Even so, it would probably be difficult for Shinobu to decide what should take precedence, between Suicidemaster's unconscious thoughts and her forced display of pride.

After all, Shinobu herself was a vampire that lived for so long while being a show-off—if you took that out of the equation, then being alive may as well be the same as being dead.

The tough and cool me, she'd said.

"Then, shall we go, *oni* onii-chan? Your little sisters have already sent their reply, right?"

"Yep. Though it's just a one-letter response that reads 'K'..."[106]

Ever since the both of them became high school students, it felt like their independence had grown too strong... It was a bit of a relief given the current situation, but as their brother, I couldn't deny that I felt a hint of loneliness.

Maybe I should let them know that I was under quarantine in a ruined country to get them all worried about me.

"Oh yeah, that's right. Ononoki-chan, before we head back to the 'Corpse Castle', do you mind if we drop by somewhere else?"

"Fine with me. Making detours is too much of a hobby of mine. Being Yotsugi and all."[107]

"Thanks. That makes me happy."[108]

"Where are we headed? The Louvre Museum? The British Museum? Mount Vesuvius? Neuschwanstein Castle?"

You must have really wanted to go sightseeing.

But you should already know that this wasn't for that purpose.

"I wanted to drop by the ruins of the Acerola Kingdom (temp.). There's something that's been on my mind."

"On your mind? Like Mayoi-nee-san's panties?"

"If you're going to hear the words 'on my mind' and take it in that completely ridiculous direction, then there's nothing I'll be able to say, you know?"

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[106] Originally a one-and-a-half-character response that read りょ *ryo*, which is Internet slang for 了解 *ryoukai* "OK, understood".

[107] 余技 *yogi* "hobby", 余接 Yotsugi. There's also あまりにも *amari ni mo* "too much", which could have been written as 余りにも, containing the same *kanji* for 余.

[108] Koyomi uses 余 *yo* here, which is an outdated first-person pronoun.

“What could you possibly want from a place where there’s literally nothing there? If you want a taste of solitude, you can just as easily do so by my side.”

“Ononoki-chan, whatever you say, I’ll still think of you as my friend.”

“How delightful. I’m getting all teary-eyed.”

Ononoki-chan said so in more of a monotone than usual, before spreading her arms in a *banzai* pose—it seemed ONK Airlines was running smoothly in spite of her doubts.

The passenger satisfaction of this aircraft was quite high.

“Unlimited Rulebook—”

It was a short-distance trip, thus minimizing the physical toll on my clinging body as well. Like one of those old travel shows, where the video would transition with a “Jump!” and a “Landing!”, the scenery around me transformed into overwhelming bleakness in an instant—with the surface being so desolate that it was impossible for me to tell whether or not we’d landed at the same coordinates as before.

“Now that it’s night, it feels even more like hell…”

“That’s only because you’re looking at the ground. Cast your eyes to the sky. The only other place you’d be able to see such a clear starry sky would be in New Zealand.”

Now that she’d mentioned it.

Indeed, despite it being night, I hadn’t gotten the feeling of it being very dark… But there was nothing to obstruct my view of the stars or the ground. To the extent that I was surprised that so many stars existed in the cosmos, the night sky of the Acerola Kingdom (temp.) sparkled brilliantly with stars.

That meant that not even the curse of “Princess Beauty” could reach as far as outer space—the stars more than made up for the hell on Earth’s surface.

“I wish I could show Hitagi this, too…”

“Oh my. Bringing up your girlfriend, when I’m by your side?”

I was made the target of Ononoki-chan’s jealousy.

Had she been trying to act affectionate with her previous words?

Such a starry sky couldn't be captured in photographs very well... But I couldn't bring Hitagi over to a ruined country like this, either.

It seemed I had no choice but to take my memories home with me.

Of course, that was assuming I could get back home alive.

And I'd need to come up with a good excuse for why I'd left the country in the midst of the pandemic.

"So, what now? If we return too late, you'll get beaten up by onee-chan."

"Beaten up... Well, if that's the case, then feel free to go on ahead of me. As long as you'll come back to pick me up."

"I can't do that. My job is to keep watch and make sure you don't kill yourself, *oni* onii-chan."

What a heavy responsibility this tween girl had been laden with... But, in a situation like this, it wasn't something I could just laugh off. As long as there were enough people to do so, a close watch needed to be kept on Suicidemaster and Shinobu, as well.

"Suicide genes... The cause of death for ninety percent. But really, those two vampires have lived insanely long lives, haven't they? Even though other vampires have opted for suicide at much earlier stages."

Was it around two hundred years?

There were even cases like Shishirui Seishirou, who'd killed himself only a few years after becoming a vampire—if it wasn't for Hanekawa, I wouldn't have even lasted two weeks.

"I guess they're the type to make a big deal about how they're gonna die, and then end up living longer than everyone else."

"The way you're phrasing that sounds a bit spiteful..."

Well, it was true that that was how it had turned out.

The fatality rate was one hundred percent... The death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster. And the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

As show-offs, they wanted to choose how they died... Rather than dying at their own hands, they hoped to be killed...

"Then, sorry about this, but can you keep me company for a bit? I'd like to do some thinking here, in this ruined kingdom—in the kingdom Shinobu brought to ruin. We only dropped by last time as our final layover, but it's been weighing on my mind ever since—"

"I see. So when I was resting my legs, *oni* onii-chan, you came to some sort of realization?"

"I can't really say anything definite... But I began thinking about if there was a chance 'Princess Beauty' destroying her own country had any connection to the current infection going around."

"So you're saying that once again, the former Heartunderblade is the mastermind? She's constantly destroying worlds, isn't she."

"No, no."

Don't jump to conclusions, Ononoki-chan.

You're turning Shinobu into a *yokai* of destruction.

"Well, taking it seriously, aside from the anti-vampire virus, you could say that even Suicidemaster's weakening and decline is connected to the former Heartunderblade. Though she was already suffering from malnutrition, the possibility isn't zero that the former Heartunderblade being enslaved by a high school student in Japan had an effect on her distant sworn friend."

If so, then rather than being Shinobu's fault, that made it more my fault—but, really, it didn't sound impossible.

Similar to how Shinobu and I were linked by a pairing, it wouldn't be odd if there was a connection between Suicidemaster and Shinobu as a relationship where blood had been exchanged, even if it wasn't a master-thrall relationship.

Telepathy, and sympathy.

Even if Suicidemaster had been gradually weakening by starving herself over the years, perhaps the spring break of two years ago had been the finishing blow—or, at the very least, an underlying cause. And

if that was the reason Suicidemaster came to see Shinobu in Japan, everything linked together.

Like the bonds of fate.

"Then, this is just a hypothesis, but if Shinobu were to return to being the King of Oddities, would that allow Suicidemaster to regain her health in turn?"

"I doubt that. A year ago, maybe, but now that she's already been inflicted with the anti-vampire virus, that life-support measure likely won't even serve as consolation. But it would have been a good plan if it were risk-free."

But far from it being risk-free... It was a bad move that could even amplify the risk of infection. It didn't even make for a good gamble. On top of that, if it meant the revival of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, then we'd be adding the new risk of her actually bringing about the downfall of the world.

"But, yeah... I think the idea of there being a linkage is important. Even if there isn't a pairing—"

Not an infection or a contagion, but a linkage.

Lost in thought, I spoke out loud.

In not a deserted island but a deserted kingdom, meaninglessly and aimlessly.

"—For an even bolder hypothesis, is there any chance that the curse of 'Princess Beauty' has a direct connection to this contagion?"

"Is that what you wanted to check on this side trip?"

Ononoki-chan folded her arms.

Did that mean she was considering it?

"Even if you ask that, I'm not actually all that familiar with the curse of 'Princess Beauty'..."

"Really?"

I thought she'd be well-informed.

But, true, the one who had told me about it was the Ononoki-chan of the "Mirror World" that had been cobbled together, and the origins of Shinobu before she was human was not actually that famous.

After all, it was a fairy tale from six hundred years ago.

There was no reason that a tween girl should know a fairy tale.[109]

Or perhaps, since she was a specialist in immortal oddities, perhaps she didn't place any importance on the story of the King of Oddities from before she was an immortal oddity—it was fine to only know the basic information.

To begin with, it was such an old story that not even Shinobu herself remembered it very well—far from being an urban legend, it was a folktale with varied interpretations.

And it could simply have been misremembered, too...

A source that would be inconsistent when given importance.

"It was a curse where, if you laid eyes on 'Princess Beauty', you would feel sorry for being alive and choose to commit suicide, no matter who you were... Or so I've heard."

"And that brought an entire country to ruin? That's worse than a vampire."

"It was a curse that had been cast upon her by an old witch... I think that's what I was told."

Since I myself wasn't exactly well-informed, either, I could only end up with uncertain wording. But at the very least, before being a noble, she was still a human, so it was not some special skill that Shinobu herself possessed.

"A princess, and an old witch, huh? I see, it really is a fairy tale—though there's no way it could end with a happy ending."

They wouldn't be able to lead happy lives.

Unhappily ever after.

The princess would continue to lead an unhappy life. As a vampire.

"Rather than an unhappy ending, it's more like an anti-happy ending. I don't hate it. However, *oni* onii-chan. From what I understand, the only point in common between that curse and the current epidemic seems to just be 'destruction'."

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[109] 童話 *douwa* "fairy tale", 童女 *doujo* "tween girl".

"Right. But, isn't that enough? Have you specialists already considered the possibility that the witch's curse was revived in this region after six hundred years?"

"...I dunno about that."

Ononoki-chan unfolded her arms.

Did that mean it was no longer worthy of consideration?

"I was about to instinctively say, 'The possibility of that is zero,' but since that just comes from my personal feelings of wanting to immediately deny your ideas without listening to them, I figured I'd think about it for a bit."

"If you're going to think about it, can you keep quiet about those feelings, too?"

"Why would the witch's curse be revived after six hundred years? Fundamentally, curses should remain in effect, right? I don't know if you've heard of her, but I have this friend named Sengoku Nadeko..."

"Yes, I know her."

She'd even cursed me.

In that winter break, where I'd died more than in spring break.

But the irony was quite pertinent—it was possible to think that the smoldering embers had been reignited for some reason. However, something still didn't feel right.

According to the story, even the witch herself had taken her own life due to the curse she'd cast upon "Princess Beauty"—it was hard to understand that with my modern sensibilities, but could she have regretted her sin of cursing "Princess Beauty"?

Even so, the death of the curse did not lead to the curse being lifted.

The curse was lifted when "Princess Beauty" was no longer "Princess Beauty"—in other words, when the woman known to Suicidemaster as Rola ascended to Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

The beautiful princess.

Chose to become a monster of her own volition—and thus lifted the curse.

“Well, even so, Shinobu had still ended up a beautiful monster. Even when it was early spring, I was still frozen in place when I met her for the first time.”

“Don’t boast about that. I’ll curse you.”[110]

The corpse doll would? To me?

While making such puns?

“Of course, Ononoki-chan, you’re beautiful, too. Ah, yes, I can remember it now, the day I met you for the first time—”

Eh?

Wasn’t it when she’d brutally murdered my sister?

“Maybe I should just abandon you here. In this barren land.”

“Then I wouldn’t be able to survive, even if there was no curse and no infection. Don’t underestimate how poor my survival skills are. I don’t even know how to start a fire.”

“In spite of you having clung to life so dirtily, though.”

I guess it’s due to your pedigree, said Ononoki-chan.

Well, it was true that Araragi Koyomi had managed to live remarkably long, somehow or other—even when I’d tried to put my life on the line, as if “it was fine if I died”, I was able to remain alive up to now.

And I couldn’t deny that it led to my lack of a sense of danger. It was about as convincing as going outside to call attention to staying at home or removing my mask to express the importance of wearing masks.

Deep down, wasn’t I just taking things too lightly and assuming that I wouldn’t die this time, either? However, something like that was no different from me going into a crowded area and believing that I would be the only person not infected.

A certain sense of privilege.

In fact, it felt somewhat surreal to be here at the center of the pandemic, though I could have already been infected by the virus with a one-hundred-percent fatality rate.

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[110] のろける *norokeru* “to boast about”, 呪う *norou* “to curse”.

Surreal—like a fairy tale.

"I'd like it if you could learn from Sengoku Nadeko."

"Hm? What is there for me to learn from Sengoku?"

"Let's see. I guess, *oni* onii-chan, you were able to overcome Nade*kou*'s curse in the end. It's already outrageous that you made the King of Oddities your slave. Oh, hold on. This isn't meant as praise, by the way."

"I get it. It's scathing criticism. It makes me actually pretty depressed, thinking about how that enslavement actually accelerated Suicidemaster's weakening—I really had no idea that my decisions could have such far-reaching influences—"

Wait a second?

It had just been a hypothesis, but if the influence of Shinobu's enslavement could spread and stir things up so extensively—then wasn't it possible to raise a different hypothesis here?

Basically, it was this.

"Princess Beauty", the daughter of the nobles who governed this land, was cursed by a witch and thus brought the country to ruin with her beauty—the entirety of her country's population was driven to suicide.

In sorrow, she chose to become a vampire to diminish her beauty, which was the root cause—all of that was fine. All of that was not a hypothesis but a fairy tale, and at the same time, it was a historical fact.

However, five hundred and seventy years after she had become a vampire.

Five hundred and seventy years after the curse had been nullified.

Hadn't a high schooler from a Far East island nation canceled that vampire transformation, without much resolve?

"...Eh? Huh?"

What did that mean?

The curse had lost its effect due to her becoming a vampire, but if Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade were to no longer be a vampire, would the curse reclaim its original atrocity?

The revival of the curse.

Clearly—there was plenty of reason for it to happen.

"Don't tell me—it's my fault?"

"Now, now, *oni* onii-chan, you've done nothing wrong. There's nothing for you to worry about. Don't worry, don't worry, it's fine, it's fine."

"What a sloppy way of backing me up... But, really, what does this mean? Can the witch's curse even technically be cast and lifted like that? Like an on-off switch... Somehow, I thought there would be more of an emotional component, but..."

There was nothing emotional about it?

It was just creepy?[111]

"Well, for one thing, I *am* a Japanese apparition. Because I'm a *shikigami*. My understanding of Western magic is shallow... But for now, the logic holds up. Including the fact that you and Shinobu-nee-san have not shown any symptoms of the anti-vampire virus."

Ononoki-chan remained in her monotone.

I couldn't tell how she felt.

At the very least, it didn't seem like the reaction from the ending of a mystery novel where the truth had been revealed—she hadn't dropped her stance of it still being at the consideration phase.

"Basically, if the origin is the curse of 'Princess Beauty', it makes sense that the person herself—it's fine to use "person" in this case—is unaffected by it. And it wouldn't be strange for you, her thrall, to have immunity to it, too."

It was a bit weird to say that she had a thrall when she wasn't even a vampire, but it was certainly true that the connection between Shinobu and me, which was like running a three-legged race, was stronger than the connection between Shinobu and Suicidemaster.

But that was nothing to be happy about.

"These are also my personal feelings, so maybe I should be keeping quiet about them, but I really don't think it's your fault at all, *oni* onii-chan. Looking back on it, the idea of making the former

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[111] エモい *emoi* "emotional", キモい *kimoi* "creepy".

Heartunderblade no longer a vampire was Oshino onii-chan's idea, not yours. If anything, it's that Hawaiian-shirt guy's fault."

"I also have a lot of things I want to say to that Hawaiian-shirt guy, but we shouldn't push the blame onto someone who isn't here..."

"It's also partly the fault of Hanekawa Tsubasa, who was there and showed no objection to the idea. You know how they say that standing by and watching bullying occur is the same as participating in the bullying? Even if they didn't elect the bully to represent them or anything."

"If we're going to make this Hanekawa's fault, then I may as well take the blame myself."

But I knew that it wasn't good to get all worked up and take on all of the responsibility myself—I was well aware of the paradox where, the more you strove to not infect others or get infected, the more it felt like a crime when you did infect others or get infected.

So—it was a matter of how to deal with it.

"I don't think the slightest bit that Oshino is at fault, but it does feel unreasonable that I have to go through all this because of an idea I had to pay five million yen for... It's not like he's Kaiki, but I feel like I've been scammed anyway."

"It's not like you actually paid up, though. Well, maybe Oshino onii-chan knew this was going to happen, which was why he didn't actually take five million yen from you."

"Doesn't that make it a conscious crime?"

Conscious of the fact that I was misusing the term conscious crime, I pondered—in the first place, the moment I carried out his plan of leaving alive the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire instead of exterminating her, Oshino's ways were already heretical as a specialist.

There was no way he'd conducted any clinical trials.

Since he was the first specialist I'd been trained by, I'd assumed that everyone was like that, but perhaps he was actually the most heretical of the specialists, more than Gaen-san or Kagenui-san, and perhaps more than even Kaiki.

“I don’t think Oshino onii-chan would like to be called a heretic by you, though, *oni* onii-chan. By an old acquaintance with the presence of, ‘Ah, so there you were’.”[112]

“Who are you saying has the presence of, ‘Ah, so there you were’?”

My tear stains weren’t going away.[113]

“Well, at this point, it’s still just a hypothesis. I’ll report it to onee-chan just in case... But I still don’t see what the curse of ‘Princess Beauty’ has in common with the current anti-vampire virus. Fundamentally, the allure of ‘Princess Beauty’ should only take effect when laying eyes upon her directly, while the anti-vampire virus appears to be an airborne infection judging from how it spreads—compared to the princess that makes her surroundings kill themselves with her beauty, the epidemic only causes vampires to shrivel up.”

When she put it like that, the differences really did stand out.

If I focused only on the points in common, then I’d lose sight of the whole picture... It was like thinking that the novel coronavirus was the same as hay fever, just because you could wear masks for both.

“Of course, there’s also the possibility that, with the former Heartunderblade having been a vampire for such a long period, the curse lay dormant within her and mutated over time. After continuing to mutate for six hundred years, it may have ended up only being able to affect vampires.”

“Don’t joke around. Are you trying to reassure me or upset me?”

“I wanted to upset you after reassuring you.”

“How awful...”

It wasn’t just my own nature, but human nature, to try to understand matters and crises through the extent of one’s own knowledge.

For example, when I was told that the large number of coffins lined up in the “Corpse Castle” contained corpses of vampires that had not

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[112] 異端 *itan* “heresy”, punned with あ、そこにいたんだ *a, soko ni itan da* “Ah, so there you were”.
[113] お馴染み *onajimi* “old acquaintance”, 涙の染み *namida no shimi* “tear stains”.

perished, but remained shriveled from dehydration like wrung-out rags, I was reminded of Kanbaru's "mummified left hand".

Though there was no connection between those two ideas.

And it would be way too simplistic to think that Kanbaru was in some way connected to this incident—even if that left hand originated from Gaen-san's sister, it was completely unrelated to this.

I don't know everything. I only know what I know.

I couldn't forget that that was the whole point of Hanekawa's catchphrase. Good grief, in the first place, in terms of shriveled corpses that looked like wrung-out rags, there had to be better mummies that I could be reminded of—

"....."

There were.

Better mummies I could be reminded of.

Mummies of vampires.

"...Ononoki-chan. Let's go back to the 'Corpse Castle'. Right now."

"Hm? Are you done with the Acerola Kingdom (temp.)?"

"Yeah, thanks for taking me sightseeing. And I'd like to trouble you with one more request—regarding that huge load of coffins. Is it okay if I can take a look inside them?"

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Because it left the strongest impression, Kanbaru's left hand had immediately come to mind, but that wasn't what I should've been reminded of—I never thought this was how I would realize how much that junior of mine, who hadn't been able to experience a graduation ceremony or an entrance ceremony, weighed on my mind.

But it was about Kanbaru's juniors.

One year ago—yet another vampire incident had occurred in my hometown, regarding Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster's visit to Japan.

A vampire legend.

I could also say it was the event that sadly led to the breaking of ties between me and Gaen-san, but it would derail my train of thought if I focused on that, so let's forget about it for a moment... While swallowing back my tears. Anyway, in my alma mater, Naoetsu High, the members of the girls' basketball team had been discovered one by one in mummified states.

All the blood had been sucked from their bodies.

Only air flowed through their blood vessels. The mummification made them so dry that it felt like they would crumble at a single touch, and yet they remained alive—as though they were immortal oddities.

Failures of vampirification—that was how Gaen-san had described it.

The ultimate fate of those who could not become thralls.

However, if it hadn't been for that, then the measures taken against Suicidemaster would not have ended with just deportation... Though there had not been any deaths, the turmoil surrounding the girls' basketball team would continue to linger, but that was another story. For now, the focal point was that "mummification".

Mummies created from Suicidemaster's "failures" or "mistakes"... And, on the other hand, the dried-up corpses of the vampires that had contracted the anti-vampire virus, with Suicidemaster at the center.

At that time, Suicidemaster herself had turned into a mummy through some form of cryptobiosis.

Like a dried rag—a wrung-out rag.

What did that mean? Was I, once again, ignoring the many differences between the two cases to only pick up on the similarities that stood out? Was I merely making simplistic connections through the extent of my own knowledge and conflating it with actual deduction?

Was I just playing at being a detective?

I didn't know.

However, unlike an invisible curse of a witch or an imperceptible epidemic, this was something I could confirm with my own two eyes.

A picture is worth a thousand words.

I'd gotten a good look at the mummies of those high school girls, after all.

And the mummies of the vampires that had not perished were piled up in the "Corpse Castle"—being something like grave-robbing, the idea naturally didn't feel pleasant to me, but it wasn't something I could simply avoid doing because of how I felt. "I can't do it, because I don't feel well," could not be forgiven.

To say the same thing as Kagenui-san.

I had come to Europe for work.

...No, that was showing off a little too much. How could I call this work, when I hadn't even worked a part-time job before? I'd never earned a single yen in my life... Thinking about it now, I found myself having immense respect for Hitagi, who had paid off Oshino's labor fees all by herself.

If you were living on your own with money from your parents, did that really count as living on your own?

Needless to say, my guilty conscience was hard at work... If I continued to be bothered by it, I might make an error in judgment, and obsessing over the idea that everything was my fault made me into an excessively self-conscious person. But still, I couldn't bear the

possibility that my carelessness from a year ago had led to the spread of the pandemic affecting the endangered species of vampires.

This wasn't something Ononoki-chan could easily back me up on.

I didn't want to believe that the turmoil within the girls' basketball team, a *coup d'etat* of sorts, for which Kanbaru and Higasa-chan had worked so hard to resolve, had resulted in unintended repercussions in this ruined country.

Getting back at the enemies in Edo by attacking Nagasaki[114]—but it was nothing like that.

In the first place, this was Europe.

It didn't matter how many ties Nagasaki had to the Netherlands.

"Okay. If that's all it is. Basically, you just want to compare the appearance of the vampire mummies entombed in the 'Corpse Castle' with the high school girl mummies you saw a year ago? That's something I don't even need to confer with onee-chan about. I'll allow it using my own judgement."

Saying that, Ononoki-chan assumed a *banzai* pose—why was it only here that she made these careless promises? What authority did she even have? Oh, I get it. Because Ononoki-chan herself was a corpse, she must not be particularly repulsed by the thought of gravedigging or grave-robbing...

If anything, it was her area of expertise.

Although, because we were dealing with mummies, it felt more like being tomb raiders for the Pyramids—even if they were vampires (or the corpses of them), I felt like a different kind of curse would befall me.

The saying that good deeds should be done quickly didn't necessarily apply here, but in any case, we returned to the "Corpse Castle" in the "Corpse Kingdom" via Ononoki-chan's "Unlimited Rulebook"—in the middle of the night, the exterior gave off a different impression, but I didn't have the time to be impressed by its stateliness.

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[114] 江戸の仇を長崎で討つ *edo no kataki o nagasaki de utsu*. Literal translation as given, but it's an idiom that means "to take revenge on someone in an unlikely place".

In spite of my airsickness, I crossed the drawbridge and made for the Corpse Castle's hall of corpses, ending up before the messy heap of coffins—in its own way, this was also more impressive when viewed at night.

Since they were all coffins of vampires, I found myself imagining the lids of all of those coffins being opened from the inside and the vampires coming out to attack me all at once—even if my body had been strengthened at the moment, there was no way I could survive being mobbed by a horde of true vampires, so I couldn't keep myself from trembling with fear on the inside.

Of course, there was no electricity in the "Corpse Castle", so the inside of this room, where the stars couldn't reach, wasn't just dark, but pitch-black. But my present condition was such that I was capable of seeing anyway... That's how it was, when Shinobu was thirteen years old. Moreover, it was like this even when she was asleep.

Maybe it would have been better to wake her up?

No, it wasn't like she had actually seen the mummies of the high school girls... Since there was no one to fact-check my comparisons, this was not the time for me to bring in my preconceived notions.

In other words, a double-blind trial.

"As you can see, the coffins have been nailed shut with silver nails, so on the off chance that any of the patients came back to life, they wouldn't be able to leave by themselves."

That was what Ononoki-chan said, but if they were silver nails, then even I would have a hard time wrenching the lids open—my physical strength may have gone up from my vampirism, but oddities were powerless before those kinds of regulations.

It was time to rely on Ononoki-chan's power.

"That's fine with me, but if you end up deciding that the mummies of the high school girls and the remains of the vampires have the same essence, then what does that mean? Since I needed to go to the North Pole to pick onee-chan up at the time, I also never got a chance to see the high school girl mummies—and that means neither did onee-chan.

Would that mean that the main offender of this anti-vampire virus pandemic is Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster?"

"No, I don't think we can simply conclude that... In terms of how strong my suspicion is, I'd say it's even weaker than the Shinobu mastermind theory."

After all, she herself was infected.

Like how the allure of "Princess Beauty" had no effect on herself, if Suicidemaster really was the main offender, then she herself should never be infected no matter what.

"It does bother me that, despite a fatality rate of almost one hundred percent, she's still alive, but it's clear that that life is about to come to an end. It's less that she's living and more that she's dying. Just that Kagenui-san and the others forcibly prolonged her life partway through—"

"She gave her consent. But also, in the world of witchcraft, there's also the concept of curses being returned to the caster. I don't know if you've heard of her, *oni* onii-chan, but—"

"Sengoku Nadeko, right?"

In the heat of the moment, I'd said her full name, but just doing so really hit close to home... In its own way, it was a curse with a lasting effect—the binding spell of a snake. It might last for a lifetime.

But anyway.

"It's not like I've thought of any conclusions in advance. Even if the vampires looked to be in the same condition as the mummies I saw a year ago, that won't be any more useful in curbing the disease, and it might even lead us to a more tragic, hopeless conclusion. But now that I've thought of it, I can't just go without confirming it."

"That's true. No objections to that."

Ononoki-chan seemed to want to object to some other things, but she quickly put her hands on a nearby coffin—because she was a corpse, she didn't hold any unnecessary fear towards corpses, but at the same time, it seemed she didn't hold any unnecessary reverence, either.[115]

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[115] 恐れ *osore* "fear", 畏れ *osore* "reverence".

Then, she revealed the contents—and sure enough.

"Um... Huh?"

"'Huh'? What do you mean by 'Huh?', *oni* onii-chan?"

"I mean, huh, I'm not quite sure..."

I was bewildered.

I'd been able to view the high school girl mummies up close and personal, and I'd even touched the wrist of one to check for its pulse, so I figured I'd be able to spot the differences if there were any... But now that the vampire mummies were right in front of me, I was baffled.

Because they looked completely different.

It wasn't that I couldn't differentiate between them, but rather, there was no need to differentiate between them at all.

The high school girl mummies had really been completely mummified, but now, I came to realize that they'd still more or less retained their original form—I see, since those dried-out high school girls' hearts were still working, and since air still flowed in their blood vessels, it had actually increased their volume.

In comparison, the mummies in these coffins looked like even their blood vessels had deflated, giving off the impression that they'd overall shrunk—I wasn't sure if this was an acceptable way to word it, but they gave off a stronger impression of being corpses.

Because that impression was so strong, it conversely made it harder for me to see them as corpses.

They seemed more like museum exhibits.

Though the idea of gravedigging was as unpleasant as ever, now that I'd made it this far, I had to look at things calmly—this was clearly different from when I'd seen the mummies of the high school girls.

I couldn't exactly compare them by lining them up together, so it would have been difficult to point out the differences one by one, but my first impression was that they were so different that that wouldn't be necessary.

If they were *this* different, then I couldn't help but think, was I being tricked or something? Was it a bad idea to make the decision off of this one coffin alone?

"Ah, that's right. Ononoki-chan, about this vampire's mummy... Do you happen to have their profile?"

"Skyrumble Triplealps Fondants. No alias. They were about a hundred and twenty years old."

"Their sex?"

"Male... Ah, I see,"

said Ononoki-chan, stepping away from the coffin she'd wrenched open.

"If you're going to compare against the mummies of high school girls, you'd need to look at the mummy of a Draculina, or it wouldn't meet the conditions for a double-blind trial. Moreover, one with the outward appearance of a high school girl... In that case, let me introduce you to Dankebitte III."

Dankebitte III?

Was she a German vampire...? Though the coffin heap looked as though it had been piled up haphazardly, perhaps it had been properly subdivided into zones based on region, sex, and possibly symptoms shown.

It made it seem all the more like a museum.

"Full name unknown, alias 'the regretful, grateful vampire'.[116] Like a two-star vampire."

"Do all aliases follow that sort of pattern?"

"A vampire girl with an outward appearance of somewhere between fifteen and seventeen. Although, even if I say 'girl', fifteen years old would be way outside your strike zone, *oni* onii-chan."

"A curveball like that is a dead ball now that I'm twenty. It's like a dangerous ball aiming straight for my head."

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[116] 陳謝にして感謝の吸血鬼 *chinsha ni shite kansha no kyuuketsuki*. It's supposed to follow the same pattern of "iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire", but I wasn't sure if it was very clear, hence this footnote.

"Her true age is about fifty-four years old. There were a lot of expectations for her as part of the new generation of vampires, but she didn't last long against the illness. As soon as she was infected, the symptoms were acute."

As she indifferently gave the details as though reciting the contents of an autopsy report, she tore off the lid of said coffin with all her might—even for human skeletons, it was apparently possible to differentiate by sex based on just the skeleton.

So, I'd thought that if I was going to compare with the mummies of high school girls, I should at least look at a female vampire, and it was just as Ononoki-chan had pointed out. However—I wasn't exactly a researcher of Egyptian history.

In university, my efforts were all concentrated on mathematics.

To be honest, I couldn't see any differences between Dankebitte III's mummy and Skyrumble's mummy... And that meant that I didn't see any similarities between Dankebitte III and the high school girls.

So my assumption had been completely off-base.

Another misunderstanding, as always.

It was a close call. If I'd made the request to Kagenui-san in order to verify this hypothesis, I would've ended up being extremely embarrassed—seeing as I'd gone as far as gravedigging, this conclusion was pretty hard to bear, but obviously, mummies came in all shapes and sizes.

"That's for sure, I'm a corpse doll, so you could consider me a zombie or a mummy if you wanted to, and there's even the profoundly mysterious phenomenon of corpse wax that exists in this world. Incidentally, what's it like if you compare these to the mummy of the 'monkey's paw' owned by Kanbaru Suruga?"

"Hmm... I mean, it was a monkey, so..."

Even if they were also primates, the skeletal differences had to go way beyond just the male-female distinction... Plus, I had never seen the full body of it. Apparently, last summer, Kanbaru had embarked upon a grand adventure with Ougi-kun to assemble the remaining mummy

parts... But it probably wasn't necessary to go on another outing to check with a video call.

"Just in case, how about you check a few more coffins? While we're at it, we may as well go and completely crush the baseless hypothesis that you came up with, *oni* onii-chan."

"When you put it that way, I get the feeling the possibility is already nonexistent... Well, it's good to not cut corners, anyway. And I might come up with something else along the way."

When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth—and in order to proclaim that something was the truth, we first needed to eliminate everything that was impossible... Process of elimination and proof by contradiction were detective skills that took a surprising amount of time. I would even say they were rather inefficient. But I liked the fact that you could do something about it with enough willpower.

It wasn't exactly random sampling, but I arbitrarily selected coffins from here and there in the pile, peeled off their lids using Ononoki-chan as something like a crowbar, and checked their contents—when I touched them just in case, there were no thriller-like developments where the coffin turned out to be mysteriously empty, or the mummy suddenly got up.

All of them were dead for sure.

Death from dehydration as a result of the contagion—and even in spite of the mummification, it was clear that they had suffered quite a bit.

"Pretty depressing, isn't it? *Oni* onii-chan."

"Yeah... I'm not trying to whine, but I think I've had enough. From what I've seen, my idea was completely off-base."

"Understood. This marks the end of the coffin gacha."

"That's a really improper way to put it!"

I may not have been able to tear off the lids, but I was more than capable of helping out with the work of putting them back on.

Splitting up the work with Ononoki-chan, we began to return the coffins to their original states as I contemplated what to do next—well, I wasn't a detective but a guinea pig, so there wasn't actually any reason for me to be thinking about this... The ideas of a guinea pig may as well be the ideas of a hamster.[117] I wasn't a specialist, after all.

I was neither a specialist of infectious diseases nor a specialist of oddities.

If anything, I was a specialist of child abuse.

"Come to think of it... I dunno what all those immortal oddity specialists might be arguing about right now, but in the end, what do you plan on doing with all these mummies? It's not like you can leave them entombed here forever... Since they're vampires, is it okay to bury them?"

"Mm, right. As an emergency evacuation of sorts, we've gathered them all here in one place, but when it comes to funeral services, each country, region, and family has its own style, so we can't really bundle them all together."

"That's not what I mean."

Rather than holding a funeral for them, vampires were monstrous apparitions that were meant to be exterminated, so despite there being coffins, maybe there shouldn't be any graves...?

As for zombies, they had the image of rising from their graves, but that was less like a memorial service and more like the moment of their birth.

For all the coffins that Kagenui-san and the others had piled up, what were they going to do with them in the end? What would be the best way to hold a memorial service for these vampires?

Cremation? Burial at sea? Burial tree? Sky burial?

Recently, there have even been space burials...

But no matter how beautiful the stars were...

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[117] モルモットの考え、ハムスターに似たり *morumotto no kangae, hamusutaa ni nitari*. A reference to the idiom 下手の考え休むに似たり *heta no kangae yasumu ni nitari*, "Those with poor ideas may as well be asleep."

I'd considered what might happen if I were to die overseas, but when it came to these vampires that had actually died...

"That's exactly why they have their various rituals. Well, actually, a vampire has a strong awareness of their own domain, so they don't have communities. So it'd be more precise to say that each vampire has their own ritual. Isn't there anything for you as a thrall? Some sort of custom."

Did you not hear anything about it from Shinobu-nee-san?

When she said that, there was something that came to mind... I was hesitant to really call it a memorial service, but it was when Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's first thrall, Shishirui Seishirou, had perished.

Shinobu.

Had eaten him.

"...So you could say it's pretty close to a sky burial. After Shishirui Seishirou was revived in the modern era, in order to ensure that he could no longer maintain his sense of self and that his life was completely extinguished from this world, Shinobu took him into herself—into her stomach, and into her heart. It was an energy drain, and it was an act of vampirism, but most importantly, I'd say it was a memorial service."

"Oh yeah, there was something like that. It's a little gruesome, but from a cultural standpoint, it wouldn't be incorrect to call it a memorial service—in particular, with vampires being unreliable, fleeting oddities who would perish in the light of the sun, allowing them to live on by taking them into one's own body could really be considered an act of compassion.

Compassion—that was probably the case.

At the very least, it hadn't been out of callousness.

However, I couldn't forget that her consumption of Shishirui Seishirou had led to some other developments in the future—the exact cause and effect was uncertain, but when Shinobu ate her first thrall, it had had a considerable effect on me, her (former) second thrall, who was paired with her—

"...Then, if Suicidemaster were to die like this, would Shinobu go and eat her corpse?"

"I don't see why not. They may not exactly have a master-servant relationship, but they were still sworn friends—there's no reason why she would eat Shishirui Seishirou and not Suicidemaster. After all, even if it's a custom held for thralls, it was likely a burial rite that was originally inherited from Suicidemaster."

Was that how it was?

Then, conversely, on the off chance that Shinobu were to die instead, Suicidemaster would memorialize Shinobu by eating her... Especially so, as that vampire that was anorexic with an unbalanced diet would still be capable of eating Shinobu, if nothing else—er, well, it was a bit hard to accept.

I couldn't help but feel an aversion to it—but I wouldn't be able to stop it, either.

Though I may have accompanied Shinobu all the way to a place like this, I knew that I couldn't do anything to interfere in their relationship.

But, now that Suicidemaster had been afflicted with that disease, she wouldn't be able to consume Shinobu, either... Things were growing more and more complicated.

"It's fine. There's no need to worry. If you die right now, *oni* onii-chan, I'm sure Shinobu-nee-san will eat you up in just the same way."

"Don't talk about me dying right now as if it's a done deal."

There was nothing fine about that.

Or rather, it was imperative that I did not forget that, in a parallel timeline, the world had been brought to ruin because of that very thing happening.

Considering that meals were converted directly into energy, I felt that I'd come up with a good reason to stop Shinobu from eating Suicidemaster's carcass.

"Right, there's no way such a bone-dry Suicidemaster would have any energy left in her. If anything, if Shinobu-nee-san were to eat the

carcass of her sworn friend, it would be a surefire way to contract the anti-vampire virus."

In that case, I had two good reasons to stop her.

They weren't necessarily the same as a carcass, but the consumption of meat and fish and the like was an exceedingly common way for epidemics to spread.

"*Oni* onii-chan, what about you? If Shinobu-nee-san were to die, would you be able to eat her?"

"Hold on, I've certainly thought before that she was a young girl that was cute enough to eat up, but ultimately that's only when she's alive."

"*Oni* onii-chan, you should just die. From saying something so dumb."

"Heh. But was the one struck dumb really me, or was it you, Ononoki-chan?"[118]

"We're in the same boat."

And in the same boat, neither of us will have graves made.

Wrapping things up with that statement, Ononoki-chan finished repairing the coffins—we'd gone and talked about how things were like this or like that, but in the end, each vampire essentially had their own way of burying the dead.

It was just their individuality, and their preference.

Realistically, though, it seemed like the world's coalition of specialists would simply keep the remains of these rare existences known as vampires as research specimens for analysis... If I couldn't interject into the "funeral service" of a vampire, then I shouldn't interject into the "specialty" of a specialist, either.

Yes, yes.

I was an adult, after all.

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[118] 失言 *shitsugen* "verbal gaffe" or "improper wording", sharing *kanji* with 言葉を失っている *kotoba o ushinatteiru* "to be at a loss for words".

“Then, as my own form of memorial service, maybe I’ll rearrange this heap of coffins to be a bit more organized. I’ve gotten a lot of practice with Kanbaru’s room, you see.”

“Leave it. This heap is pretty well-designed, for onee-chan.”

Spoken like someone who never cleaned up.

I couldn’t help but imagine that the former butler of the “Corpse Castle” would have fainted at the sight of this ballroom having been turned into a morgue—let’s see, was it Tropicalesque? Tropicalesque Homeawave Dogstrings?

The vampire who’d been killed by “Princess Beauty” in this castle.

...In that case, had Suicidemaster also memorialized him at the time by eating him?

"....."

Then, that meant...?

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Living things were made up of the food they ate.

For example, if a crayfish is fed only mackerel, its shell will apparently turn blue... And the poison of the fugu is not something it produces naturally within its body, but an accumulation of the tetrodotoxin from the continued consumption of poisonous plankton.

It was the same for humans.

Of course, it had its limits... Eating lots of seafood did not make you better at swimming, and eating chicken would not give you the ability to fly—in the first place, chickens themselves could not fly. But even so, whatever you eat—whether that's meat or vegetables, animals or inanimate objects—will become energy.

No matter the meal, it will be energy-drained.

If you eat gold leaf, you'll end up feeling luxurious.

Even if it has no taste.

Eating habits, food culture, nutritional balance, proteins, sugars, fruits, sweets, carbonated drinks, alcohol, fermented foods, an unbalanced diet, preserved foods, low-calorie foods, a low-carb diet, hunting, fishing, vegetarianism, condiments, seasonings, space food, fasting—famine.

And, eating humans.

If it was true for humans, then it was true for vampires.

Eat or be eaten—just as Ononoki-chan had said, the idea of eating as a kind of memorial service may be rare, but it was certainly not unique.

For an extreme example, even I would say "Thanks for the meal" before eating—thanks for the life I'm about to partake in.[119] And I'd been taught that leaving food uneaten on the table was an act of blasphemy towards that life.

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[119] いただきます *itadakimasu*, a phrase said before a meal. Often translated as "Thanks for the meal", but it literally means "I receive", with the follow-up being "I will receive this life".

Wasting food was the same as wasting life, and playing with your food was the same as playing with life, was how I'd been brought up—it was like a moral upbringing, at the same time, the idea was instilled down to my bones that we were living beings that needed to consume the lives of other living beings to live.

I'd understood that long ago, but especially by the time I was a high schooler.

Don't you know I'll die if I don't eat?

Yet when Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade said this to me with a blank expression, I was unable to accept it—I couldn't acknowledge that eating was a show of respect, and a show of thanks.

In that spring break, despite every nook and cranny of my body having become a vampire, I, Araragi Koyomi, said this.

I am human.

However, what if, at that time, she had responded with:

It is *because* you are human, no?

"Hm? What's the matter, Araragi-kun? I don't care if you're nocturnal now or whatever, but if you've finished your remote meeting with your little sisters, then you should go to bed when it's bedtime. We don't know when you'll start suddenly showin' symptoms. You can pick whatever room you'd like."

"Right. Ononoki-chan is getting some rest, too. Since I ended up overusing her for a bunch of things again."

"Sheesh, whose *shikigami* is she supposed to be?"

After finishing my inspection of the coffin room, I had parted ways with Ononoki-chan and had headed straight for the Corpse Castle's library—though she was advising me to go to bed, Kagenui-san herself was staying up late.

She probably had a lot of things to think about. For someone who was usually pretty thoughtless. And there was no doubt that her problems had only multiplied by our arrival here... Rather than pointing the way to a solution, it felt like we'd come here from Japan specifically to be nuisances.

From there, I was about to bring her yet another source of worry. It was like I hadn't made any progress in the slightest.

But even so, I had to keep moving forward.

I couldn't just give it a rest.

"Excuse me. Despite being nocturnal, the jet lag and the long flight has made me feel pretty dizzy, but still, Kagenui-san, I wanted to consult you about something before going to bed..."

As I wondered what time it was now in Japan, and if it had become "tomorrow" by now over there, I took the seat diagonally across from Kagenui-san.

It was a countermeasure against the novel coronavirus that had already become a habit for me. It was something I didn't forget, even at a time like this.

"What is it? Y'wanna learn the most efficient way to earn credits in university?"

She was really interested, wasn't she?

Incidentally, I hadn't expected this remote situation to last very long, so I'd ended up signing up for a completely messy schedule.

However, my concerns (obviously) did not have to do with that.

Rather than a consultation, this was more a ghost story.[120]

"You don't have to hold back, y'know? I might not have the know-how for remote lectures, but if you use my methods, you should be able easily catch up from being a month behind—"

"As a matter of fact, there's a chance that we might be able to return to Japan as soon as tomorrow. Me, and even you, Kagenui-san. If my idea is correct."

Kagenui-san said, "Tomorrow?" and raised her head.

Honestly, "tomorrow" was an exaggeration. Even before that, what did I mean by "If my idea is correct"?—was there ever a single time that my ideas had ever been correct?

If anything, it was more, "If my bad premonition was accurate"—for that, I'd always hit the bull's-eye.

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[120] 相談 *soudan* "consultation", 怪談 *kaidan* "ghost story".

"All right. If you're tryin' to learn how to bluff, that's a great start."

"It could be completely off the mark, and maybe it's an idea that you specialists have already looked into. So I just wanted you to evaluate it, Kagenui-san. Would you mind hearing me out?"

"Of course. After all, it's been hard not to get a hankering for some Japanese food. ...That wasn't meant to be a pun on *natto*, by the way."[121]

Kagenui-san said so, as if to keep up appearances.

Er, that wasn't really something you needed to keep up appearances for... Though I'd heard that they don't eat *natto* all that much in the Kansai region.

They didn't eat it, huh... A matter of preferences.

"Um... Where should I begin? I haven't exactly gotten all my thoughts in order."

"Just start from wherever. I can put it all in order myself."

How reliable.

Though she'd only ever acted as a power-type character together with Ononoki-chan, she was surprisingly the logical type—there was a lot I could learn from her, as someone who could only come up with brute-force plans.

After clearing my throat, I began to speak.

"Kagenui-san, how much do you know about the legend of 'Princess Beauty'? Ononoki-chan didn't seem to know too much about it, herself."

"I dunno all that much, either. Not like I can go and interview the person herself."

Well, I myself hadn't gotten the story to that level of detail. On top of Shinobu not remembering it very well, she probably didn't want to talk about it very much, either—I had only learned what I did as a result of stumbling into the "Mirror World" by chance and hearing the story from "the person herself" in a place much like heaven.

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[121] In the Kansai dialect spoken by Kagenui, なっている *natteiru* "is becoming" turns into なっとう *nattou*.

It was highly irregular.

As such, I began with an explanation of that story, and then I presented the commonalities between the curse of "Princess Beauty" and the anti-vampire virus—originally, I'd planned on letting Ononoki-chan report that information, but ultimately, as the one proposing the idea, it was better if I explained it myself.

At this point, it was only the preface, after all.

"I see. I dunno if the word 'destruction' really applies in the same way to both of them, but I get the feeling we can't just consider them completely unrelated. The theory that the curse of 'Princess Beauty' was revived when the King of Oddities, Heartunderblade, was turned into the former Heartunderblade is also pretty compelling—but if that's all, then although I can give you the credits, it's not worthy of an A or a B. It's not 'Excellent' or 'Satisfactory', either."[122]

What era would that make me a student from?

A temple school in the Edo era?

"I'd bet Yotsugi already pointed it out, but the differences are a lot bigger than the similarities. Especially the route of infection—or was the curse of 'Princess Beauty' actually so powerful and so virulent that just hearin' rumors about it could drive someone to suicide?"

"Considering that it had gone as far as bringing an entire country to ruin, it's not impossible, but even if the curse was actually revived, I wouldn't think it came back as the exact same curse of 'Princess Beauty'. The mutations that Ononoki-chan mentioned would have certainly occurred."

The mutation of oddities.[123]

Because they were essentially rumors, it was inevitable they would end up changing like some game of telephone—just as how the vampires of six hundred years ago were not entirely the same as the vampires of the present day.

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[122] Kagenui first says 優 *yuu* and 良 *ryou*, which are Japanese grades equated to the letter grades A and B in other grading systems. She then says 甲 *kou* and 乙 *otsu*, which are from an outdated grading system.

[123] 変異 *hen'i* "variation, mutation", 怪異 *kaii* "oddity".

Not even traditional art would be the same when compared to its origins.

Apparently, the recently-popular Amabie originally used to be called Amabiko.

A game of telephone—a game of contagion.[124]

"Of course, I do bear some responsibility for the downsizing of Shinobu, but though she's no longer a vampire, that doesn't mean she'd reverted back to being human or even a princess. Analyzing it as the originator of the idea, I'd say it's pretty doubtful that the curse would even return."

From what I'd heard, it was a curse that was triggered based on beauty.

If the question was if Shinobu regained her beauty by turning into a golden-haired young girl, then it might be lacking in consideration for my partner to deny it outright, but if anything, she was self-indulgent, slothful, lackadaisical, lethargic, contrarian, lazy, selfish, and a spoiled brat.

As for whether or not she was beautiful, I'd say she had been far more beautiful when she was a vampire—a demon so beautiful that my eyes would be blinded, my blood would boil, and my spine would get chills.

"From experience—that is, from what I'd experienced in the Mirror World and in heaven, not having experienced it in reality—when it came to the allure of 'Princess Beauty', her outward appearance was a matter of course, but I'd say that it pointed to her inner beauty as well."

"Haha. Like the Pretty Boys Detective Club,"

said Kagenui-san, laughing.

What was she laughing about—was she in the pretty boys' faction?

"Well, I ain't duty-bound to back you up on that, but I'd say that the former Heartunderblade became self-indulgent because she desired as such. In other words, having her blood sucked by Suicidemaster was not a promotion, but a degradation. In that case, the nullification of the

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[124] 伝言ゲーム *dengon geemu* "game of telephone", with 伝染 *densen* "contagion".

curse should still remain in effect—but what then, Araragi-kun? I dunno what you're tryin' to do by refutin' your own hypothesis, but I'm lookin' forward to what's up next."

"Well, that's the thing. It's established practice for me to start my own fires and put them out, but for Shinobu... Or rather, for Princess Acerola, she was released from the witch's curse by having Suicidemaster suck her blood. In a way, it feels like the ending of a fairy tale... But, even if that was fine for 'Princess Beauty', whose blood was sucked, did Suicidemaster, the one who sucked the blood, really come out of this unscathed?"

"Hm?"

"I've seen Shinobu take the oddities she's eaten or the energy she's consumed and make them into a part of herself. Among those, there was the case of her eating her first thrall, Shishirui Seishirou, which turned into a pretty big deal, as you are well aware—by taking in the consumed oddity as energy, she both receives its influence and spreads it around.

And that influence could be a negative one.

Shishirui Seishirou himself had used his energy drain to receive influence from Kanbaru's left arm—from the mummified monkey.

In the first place, though he was supposed to have committed suicide, Shishirui Seishirou had managed to revive in the modern era in such a manner—he had greedily gobbled down the fragments of oddities that were floating around the grounds of the Kitashirahebi Shrine.

Which ultimately led to the birth of Oshino Ougi.

"...I still don't see where you're headed with this. I already know that, as the King of Oddities, the former Heartunderblade can take the energy she's consumed and make it a part of herself, but vampires have always been those kinds of beings, as well as non-beings. But what about it?"

"If it's something Shinobu can do, then it's also something Suicidemaster can do. Or rather, it's not something Suicidemaster can avoid. Basically—not today or last year, but six hundred years ago...

What if the curse of ‘Princess Beauty’ migrated from Princess Acerola to Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster?”

Migration.

Or—a contagion.

“So, that was the first thing I wanted to ask about. Although Shinobu was freed from her curse when she became a vampire, Suicidemaster took the curse upon herself as compensation. How plausible would you say this hypothesis is?”

When Suicidemaster consumed “Princess Beauty”, she was left with the unbalanced diet of being unable to consume anything other than “Princess Beauty”—and the influence here could not be treated as a simple matter of preference, but a kind of allergy or even the negative influence of a toxin.

“Sounds very possible. It’s almost like it’d be even weirder if that weren’t the case—and it’s hard to believe a single vampire would be able to fully digest a curse that was *that* heinous.”

Like indigestion, said Kagenui-san.

“But if that’s all there is to it, then I can’t fully digest that hypothesis, either. In the end, the witch’s curse may have migrated over, but it ain’t like the destructive spell is taking effect from within Suicidemaster’s body. Hard to say that her insides are particularly beautiful by any standard.”

“Indeed.”

It might have been improper of me to agree with an “Indeed”, but from the impression I’d gotten from briefly speaking with her last spring, Suicidemaster’s tough and cool personality was not one that I wanted to get too close to. Naturally, her pompousness had been reduced on the sickbed of her throne, but Shinobu could only become her sworn friend because she was equally as pompous.

If she was like that right now, then I could only imagine what her personality could have been in her heyday.

"...Although, since the act of sucking the blood of 'Princess Beauty' would be equivalent to a suicidal act, I wouldn't say that it's not beautiful at all."

"What a surprise. Araragi-kun, are you the kind of guy that thinks that self-sacrifice is beautiful?"

"No. If anything, I'm the type to think that it's ugly."

"That's just self-loathing, then."

Don't aim for my weak points.

That hurts even more than your punches.

"There are plenty more retorts I could've made, but I can hit you with all of 'em later, so for now, let's keep going. The curse of 'Princess Beauty' migrated over to Suicidemaster six hundred years ago. And the curse remained dormant within her body. In epidemiological terms, it'd be an incubation period. A six-hundred-year-long incubation period—well, I guess there are viruses that are on such an astronomical scale. For humans, it'd be like shingles for the chickenpox virus. So? Now we just need the reason for it takin' effect after all this time... And the reason for it mutatin'."

"Right. This was already pointed out by Ononoki-chan, but the causes of death are different, after all. Killing yourself from being affected by overwhelming beauty, versus dying by becoming desiccated from dehydration. Perhaps the route of infection could be explained with just a minor change, but for the infection itself, a simple mutation won't cut it."

"What an excellent *shikigami* I have. She can get an A from me."

Somehow, Ononoki-chan had earned the credits... But what university was she even going to?

Had she skipped grades?

In layman's terms, it was likely that a virus spread by droplet transmission would mutate to spread by airborne transmission, and that was in fact one of the most feared possibilities for the novel coronavirus—but it wasn't a trivial matter for the symptoms themselves to change completely.

It was a level of mutation that would make it seem as though the hypothesis itself was wrong.

"At first, I thought about if Suicidemaster's visit to Japan could have had an influence. A lot of high school girls had been turned into mummies back then, right? And even Suicidemaster herself. So, I figured the dried-up vampires here in Europe might have some relation to that—if vampires are strongly influenced by the blood they suck, then it wouldn't be strange for Suicidemaster to have been dyed in the doom and gloom of the girls' basketball team."

"Sounds reasonable."

"That's what I thought. So, with Ononoki-chan's help, we went around opening a bunch of the coffins in the morgue—"

"Seriously, whose *shikigami* is she supposed to be? And just a while back, she'd been working so hard as though she were Nadeko-chan's *shikigami*."

"—But after comparing the high school girl mummies and the vampire mummies, the way they were dried out was completely different. Of course, Japanese high school girls and European vampires differed in lots of ways, like physical make-up and skeletal structure, but still, it was hard to say that they'd undergone mummification following the same rules."

"Honestly, that's something I'd like to have a specialist coroner verify. Rather than leaving it up to your amateur judgment, Araragi-kun."

"No, for this particular matter, it might've been hard even for a specialist to realize. It might've even been harder for a specialist to realize."

"Huh?"

Kagenui-san tilted her head.

Oops, my explanation had been lacking—at the same time, it was something that was hard to explain. It would be quite insolent of me if that came across as me saying that my judgment as an amateur was better than that of a specialist.

"Er, that's not it... What I meant to say was, the differences between the two types of mummies was so obvious that anyone would realize upon looking at them. That's why this case has no relation to the high school girls of my alma mater. On the surface, at least... However, I am almost certain that, considering the timing, Suicidemaster's trip to Japan to visit her sworn friend was the catalyst for the reactivation of the witch's curse, which had lay dormant within Suicidemaster for six hundred years."

Incidentally, or perhaps not so incidentally at all, the hypothesis that the debilitation of Suicidemaster was connected to the enslavement of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade remained as strong as ever.

I didn't know what the true intentions of that true ancestor were, but if she did think, "My time's almost up," and come to Japan to see her old friend before she died, then I couldn't help but be troubled about having been the underlying cause.

If the fact that I had saved Shinobu—and the fact that I had not saved Shinobu—was indeed the cause.

"I see. So after six hundred years, the reunion with the former Heartunderblade itself was the trigger for the reactivation of the curse? Due to a chance meeting with the source of the curse—"

"I think the chance of that is very high. The chance that the curse was stimulated by 'meeting' Shinobu—however, that still doesn't explain the mutation. If vampires all over Europe had started to commit *seppuku* instead, then we could have considered this resolved."

"Rather than resolved, more like utter chaos. It would be an outrageous way of spreading Japanese culture across the world."

"So, there had to be some other component involved. Even if that component was not a high school girl from Japanese culture—I'd finally managed to realize this after getting this far, but before Suicidemaster sucked the blood of 'Princess Beauty', at almost the same time, the death-prepared, death-certain, death-inevitable vampire had consumed another being, you see."

"Another being?"

"Or, another non-being. Tropicalesque Homeawave Dogstrings."

Her first and only thrall.

The butler of this "Corpse Castle".

"Though she should have decided that she would only be eating 'Princess Beauty', she happened to welcome her butler into her stomach. That vampire, who had tried to kill 'Princess Beauty' and had only gotten killed in return, should have ultimately had his remains eaten by Suicidemaster as a memorial service."

"...Yeah, sounds about right. And?"

"However, even if he was memorialized, it doesn't mean he would have necessarily attained nirvana, right? Although, it's not clear whether or not vampires can even attain nirvana in the first place... But regardless of how spectacular a funeral is held for you, if you have any regrets left in this world, you'll lose your way."

Just like what had happened to the god who was a lost child, Hachikuji Mayoi.

Whether through memorial services or prayers, there were some thoughts that could not be buried.

There were some corpses that could not be mourned.

"Especially if he was killed by the curse of 'Princess Beauty', there would be no way that he didn't leave behind any regrets. In particular, unlike someone like me, and even unlike Shishirui Seishirou, Tropicalesque was allegedly an extremely devoted thrall to his master—he would have rued the fact that he'd died earlier than his master and made her go through the trouble of memorializing him."

Though that was something I could only imagine.

It was immeasurable, unfathomable, when looked at through the lens of human values—how much would one aspire to be eaten by the master they served?

How much of an honor would they consider it?

"But, what I can say for sure is that the pairing had to have been bad."

"The pairing?"

"In European terms, it would be like a *mariage*, I believe…[125] You know, like watermelons and *tempura*, or *unagi* and *umeboshi*…[126] Stuff like that."

"In that case, *mariage* would be the complete opposite. But you're talkin' about foods that would make you feel sick if you ate them together, right?"

Right—well, the thing about watermelons and *tempura* was just a superstition, but it was true that some foods that were safe to eat individually could transform into something nearly inedible (though not to the level of being poisonous) when prepared together or eaten at the same time.

Transformed. Mutated.

"It's not just the site of an infectious disease where you won't be safe during mealtimes—and there are rules about not feeding chocolate to dogs, or onions to cats, too. They also say that you shouldn't give honey to infants."

"Or *mochi* to the elderly."

Well, that was slightly different… Although, you could say it was more or less the same.

While Tropicalesque was a thrall, he could hardly be considered chocolate or onions or honey or *mochi*, and yet—his affinity with 'Princess Beauty' was the worst.

They would never be able to agree.

Their relationship had been one of killing and being killed.

And the two of them had been consumed by one vampire in the span of a single day—devoured with gusto.

In that vampire's belly, they would get mixed up, the thrall and the curse.

As if that would allow him to rest in peace. Despite dying, he wouldn't be able to fully die—despite a memorial service being held, he

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[125] マリアージュ *mariaaju*, "*mariage*", which is French for "marriage". Japan abuses this loanword to mean "the pairing of wine with food".

[126] In Japan, these are combinations of foods known traditionally as causing problems when eaten together (such as indigestion).

wouldn't be able to fully be memorialized—despite trying to attain nirvana, he wouldn't be able to keep himself from losing his way. After six hundred years, it would be more unreasonable if that didn't make him depressed—

"...So, rather than Suicidemaster's encounter with the former Heartunderblade being the trigger for the curse's reactivation, you're saying that the reunion of Tropicalesque, laying dormant within Suicidemaster's body, with the former Heartunderblade, the target of his resentment, was what satisfied the conditions for its activation?"

"Yes, and I believe that meets the conditions for the curse's mutation, too. Rather than a single virus continuously multiplying and mutating as a result of mistakes during gene duplication, this allows for a far more dramatic mutation—wasn't that how new strains of influenza were created?"

For a rough explanation, the human influenza virus and the avian influenza virus mixed together within the body of a pig, forming a new strain of the influenza... It went something like that.

The curse of her sworn friend named 'Princess Beauty' and the loyalty of her butler named Tropicalesque... If they were absorbed into each other within Suicidemaster's stomach, and if they fused together as concepts—then couldn't something quite disgusting and destructive be born? That was what I wanted to ask.

A horrendous flavor of tropical juice.

High school girls really had a tremendous influence. In fact, a good number of fads in Japan could be attributed to them—so my thoughts had been pulled towards them, as well. However, the influence of a thrall who met an untimely end would be substantial—perhaps surpassing that of the host, Suicidemaster, even.

"So it's like the witch's curse was not simply revived, but reborn—and I think that also explains why the infection broke out after her deportation to Europe, instead of spreading first in Japan."

Well, putting aside if there were even any other vampires in Japan… At the very least, neither I nor Shinobu had exhibited any symptoms in the past year.

"You mean the time lag between infection and showing symptoms, right? Let's see… To be honest, the explanation makes everything come together so perfectly, it's actually makin' me skeptical…"

said Kagenui-san carefully.

I was already thankful that she didn't outright dismiss, or laugh down, the patchwork ideas of an amateur—if anything, I could only worry that my future amateur ideas would not be worthy of a similar level of consideration.

"The reason for its renewal was due to food poisoning as a result of a bad pairing—let's call that the super-toxification theory. But, for the curse of 'Princess Beauty', which drove humans and vampires, animals and plants, witches and countries, anything and everything without distinction, to suicide… What would be the reason for such a curse mutating into a curse that dries out vampires and turns them into mummies?"

Viruses could not be considered living beings and had no will of their own, and though the novel coronavirus may have seemed as though it was harassing people, it was not doing anything like picking a fight with humanity, or even nastily plotting humanity's destruction. An epidemic was nothing more or less than an epidemic—it was not an enemy.

Similarly, goals did not matter for evolution.

Animals wanting to lengthen their necks because they couldn't reach food with their mouths, or thinking it would be convenient if their noses were longer—the process of evolution would not be spurred on due to those reasons. It was simply the cruel law of survival of the fittest.

However.

On the other hand, if there did indeed exist a will, and there did indeed exist a goal, then evolution could be controlled—for example,

genetically modified organisms, or the selective breeding of pets and livestock.

If an animal couldn't reach food with its mouth, then we could use our hands to grab it for them, or use our feet to get it from somewhere else. And that could provide a bit of direction to their evolution.

And in this case—they did exist.

A curse might only be able to activate automatically if the conditions were met, but for the thrall that was consumed at the same time, he had a will as clear as that of an earthbound spirit, and he would faithfully pursue his goal from within his master.

Stubbornly, like a butler.[127]

His dying wish—like a genetic sequence.[128]

"You sayin' that Tropicalesque tried to utilize the witch's curse to try and destroy all the vampires in the world? As revenge for his own death? How strong of a grudge would he have had?"

"There may have been 'ghosts' or 'snakes' with such strong grudges, but if it was merely out of revenge, I don't think the curse would have become that powerful. But if there was anything Tropicalesque might have regretted, enough to not fully die even after dying—it would not be because he was killed, but because he had failed to kill."

"—Because he'd failed to kill the former Heartunderblade, or rather, 'Princess Beauty'."

Even so, it wasn't out of spite.

It was neither enmity, nor was it a grudge.

It was loyalty.

As her thrall and as her butler, he simply could not accept the thought of her master becoming friends with the princess who cursed her—so he tried to kill her, and thus had the tables turned on him.

If he was able to fuse with the very curse that killed him—how would that butler want to use the energy of that curse?

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[127] 執事 *shitsuji* "butler", 執拗 *shitsukou* "stubborn".
[128] 遺志 *ishi* "dying wish", 遺伝子 *idenshi* "genes".

What direction would he point it towards?

And who was it that he'd met, which led to the awakening of the binding spell that had been lying dormant?

"So it wasn't that he wanted to cause the destruction of all vampires—but even in death, he was trying to kill the former Heartunderblade... The golden-haired young girl, Oshino Shinobu."

"Yes. Out of loyalty."

It was something that I entirely lacked.

Most likely, it was something that Shishirui Seishirou lacked, too.

So while it was impossible to say that I could understand how he felt—perhaps it would at least be fine to describe those feelings like this.

It was...

It was an extremely beautiful display of loyalty.

"...For a moment, I was nearly taken in by your clever words, Araragi-kun, but he hasn't actually managed to kill her. Once again, you could say... Though he's gone and gotten a bunch of other vampires killed."

"Sorry, and my explanation was lacking, if anything. I mentioned giving direction to the evolution, but in the end, he would have had to basically leave it up to fate. It won't always work out perfectly."

Even with a will of his own, the evolution could still fail.

For example, I had come up with various plans for my fresh start as a university student, but then a great upheaval had struck the world. With remote classes becoming the norm, my project to make a hundred friends had been reduced to nothing.

What would happen to me in the grueling job search that awaited me in the future?

How many creatures were there that ended up perishing as a result of their evolution...? And, how many monsters?

"As I mentioned earlier, at the moment the curse became active, his master had already been deported to Europe, away from Japan where Shinobu was. Perhaps that's why it's spread by airborne transmission... Or aerosol transmission. Considering that vampires can become mist."

Recalling that old battle with Episode that had become nostalgic for me, I continued by saying, "From this point on, this is all just going to be conjecture, but..." Well, it wasn't just from this point on but everything from the very beginning that was a product of my conjecture, but I figured I'd state it once again.

"Though the deportation created a distance of, not two meters, but half the circumference of the Earth from the target, the curse that was activated continued to aim for Shinobu and Shinobu alone. Stubbornly, the infection spread. To try and reach the other side of the world."

An epidemic that spread from vampire to vampire.

From the center of Europe, it tried to spread out—and out and out and out—and, with the progression of the pandemic, it would eventually arrive at the Far East island nation.

If so, then it was not quite an aerosol transmission.

It could be called a vampiric transmission.

"It was a contagious disease that only infected vampires not because those vampires were the targets, but because they were the midway points, the base stations, the layovers, and the catalysts—vampires were the means of transportation to reach the other side of the world."

"Means of transportation, eh? In other words, you're sayin' that the true form of the anti-vampire virus is actually a vector-borne disease spread with vampires as the vector. But if that's the case, then wouldn't it have been even better to infect humans with it, too? If the ultimate goal of all those layovers was to reach the former Heartunderblade for its final destination, then I get why it's a contagion that affects vampires—but I don't see why it couldn't use humans as a means of transportation, too."

"Yes. For the Black Death, which has left a strong impression in Japan for starting a pandemic in Europe, it was originally a bacterium that had stowed away into Europe as a result of global trade, after all."

The reason for the novel coronavirus's rapid spread across the world is in large part due to the growth of air travel, and the further

internationalization and globalization of humankind—the breakneck speed at which the novel coronavirus spread in infected areas gave off the impression that it was incredibly contagious, but in fact, it was not actually all that outstanding. Nevertheless, it propagated at a rate historically incomparable to the Black Death or cholera or smallpox, spreading out like vital infrastructure.

A thousand years from now, I could imagine infections utilizing rockets or space elevators to reach Mars in an instant. So if the anti-vampire virus were to be spread globally and efficiently, it made the most sense to use humans for the layover points—to employ humans, who encompassed territories wider than vampires, with larger areas of activities.

"...However, that means of transportation had already been occupied. By the time the mutation had caught up."

"Aha—y'mean viral interference?"

I nodded.

Well, there was no way to scientifically verify that humans could not serve as vectors for the curse because of the spread of the novel coronavirus—I doubted there were many of us rare potential guinea pigs like me and Shinobu, or perhaps the half-vampire Episode.

However, it didn't really matter whether or not viral interference could actually occur.

Because the novel coronavirus had been one step ahead in sweeping the world—humanity's internationalization, travel, and non-essential and non-urgent outings had been brought to a halt all at once.

A lockdown.

In Japan, there may have not been any lockdowns from a legal standpoint, but I still remembered requests to voluntarily refrain from any traveling that crossed prefectural borders—but even that would not be enough to fully prevent the infection from spreading.

However, for the anti-vampire virus, which needed to reach the other side of the world, using humans as the vectors could not necessarily be considered the shortest possible route.

Rather, limiting the route of infection to only vampires, who were unlikely to be infected with the novel coronavirus—which could theoretically be proven—would be an exceedingly logical and calculated course for the virus to take.

Compared to birds or bats.

"I haven't gotten around to thinking about why the symptoms involve dehydration and mummification, though—"

There was probably a reason for that, too. Perhaps Tropicalesque's personal preferences from deep within his psyche had gotten mixed in, but if so, we'd have to leave the matter unsolved. His master, Suicidemaster, had had a propensity to go into cryptobiosis after getting food poisoning, but that seemed like a rule unique to her, so...

"Well, leaving behind the body does make it easier for the disease to spread, but that's about as far as I can infer..."

And yet, it didn't sit right with me.

At that point, it was no longer the dormant unconsciousness of the dead, but something that was clearly deliberate... But in fact, diseases that affect plants did use the very same process to expand their range of infection...

Was the purpose of mummification simply long-term preservation of the corpses?

Like dried fruits?

"All right. I get it, so there's no need to keep thinking about that point. We can just chalk it up to a mutation for now—I wasn't gonna make you think of everything, Araragi-kun, and we gotta leave some mysteries unsolved for Gaen-senpai."

So Kagenui-san herself wasn't going to solve the mysteries...

Well, she didn't seem like the type to be inquisitive and solve mysteries.

"But there's one more thing, one more mystery that could make or break the entire case. According to your logic, Tropicalesque, warped as he was, was spreadin' the curse-based contagion out of loyalty to his master, Suicidemaster—but, you've met her yourself, Araragi-kun. Suicidemaster is on the verge of death due to that very disease."

"That would be the most apparent sign of the evolution's failure—even though it was a curse to protect Suicidemaster and to kill Shinobu, the curse, strong enough to bring down an entire country, ended up affecting his master, as well."

A virus could not let its own host die. If the host died, the virus itself would die, too—however, that was only theoretical. In actuality, there were endless viruses that were eradicated for that reason.

There was no strategy for survival or anything of that sort.

Whether or not there was a goal in mind, failure was failure, and death was death.

Despite being immortal, death was still death.

To begin with, Tropicalesque had already died six hundred years ago—all parts of him but his loyalty.

"Guess there's also the flesh-eating bacteria that's like that, now that I think about it—however, Araragi-kun. If it's like that, then it can hardly be called loyalty, now, can it?"

"Um... I'm not sure. It's true that Tropicalesque's dying wish is completely ignoring Suicidemaster's own wishes... But his desire to single-mindedly serve his master, even if it led to him being disliked or hated—"

"That ain't loyalty anymore. It's love."

Hearing those words come from the person who seemed least likely to say those words made me feel as though my head had just been stepped on.

But it didn't seem that Kagenui-san had meant to say anything particularly strange, as she continued.

"In that case, though, I've made a huge blunder, huh? By callin' you and the former Heartunderblade over here. Though the former

Heartunderblade is the target of the curse, I went and expressly summoned her here, even in the middle of this pandemic,"

she said.

"...If only for the sake of keeping the pandemic under control, it was the best thing to do. Now that the target is right by the host, Tropicalesque has no need to continue expanding his area of infection."

It was wishful thinking, but at the very least, containment should be possible—a much simpler process than having to enact lockdowns for the novel coronavirus.

As long as the spread of this virus had a goal, and a sense of direction.

As long as it was possible to understand its transformation and mutation.

A specialist would have any number of ways to deal with it.

"But what if you and the former Heartunderblade are already infected by now?"

"Oh? Are you worrying about immortal vampires? Kagenui-san."

"I'm gonna tear you to shreds. Until not a speck of you is left."

Scary...

I'd gotten carried away—after all, I'd been talking for way too long. To think I'd ended up going on and on about gossip with no evidence.

"That's for sure. For Araragi-kun, that gossip of yours barely earns you a B, but it ain't as much as an A—it'll probably take more time to verify the truth. The specialist coalition's at the end of its rope, so any new hypothesis would be welcome, but saying that we could return tomorrow was way too exaggerated, even for a bluff."

"Right. And so, we're finally getting to the real issue."

"You're kiddin', right? Then what was all of that up to now?"

Like I said, it was idle gossip.

However, based on this idle gossip, there was a potential treatment for the dying Suicidemaster that I wanted to try—and, at the same time, it could also be linked to saving Shinobu, if she had already gotten infected.

And, of course, it could save me as an afterthought.

“A treatment that you wanted to try?”

“Yes. Based on this idle gossip, I wanted to propose an operation. But it’s not a surgical procedure, and it’s not like medication or vaccination, either—it’s diet therapy.”

Or, you could put it like this.

Perhaps the words sounded even cornier coming from my mouth than from Kagenui-san’s, but I couldn’t afford to miss out on riding this wave.

What I wanted to administer—was love.

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I'd said that so pretentiously, but what I wanted to administer was not my own love—my love was reserved for Senjougahara Hitagi with no room to spare. Along with Oikura, Hanekawa, Kanbaru, my sisters... And a golden-haired young girl.

There really was no room to spare.

That had been the direction for my evolution.

So naturally, the one to wield, not the scalpel, but the cutlery, was the shadow of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderlade—Oshino Shinobu.

The love between sworn friends.

It would probably be harder to convince her compared to Kagenui-san... In her own way, she might hold to the principle that not saving her sworn friend on the verge of death was cooler.

"Rather than being unwilling to, the idea simply sounds unpleasant. I really should have left you behind in Japan, my master."

Shinobu had been dragged out from within my shadow, and given that she'd been the King of Oddities and a princess, perhaps I could describe her as being in a royally bad mood.[129] But she did not particularly try to hide the dent in her attitude, nor did she try to shut herself away, as she'd done during the case with Shishirui Seishirou—if she were going to reject the specific methods that were presented to her, she wouldn't have come to Europe in the first place.

It wasn't the time to act cool.

"Hmph. Do not misunderstand, my master. I simply believe that 'tis Deathy's true desire to die like this. However, if that hypothesis, if that super-hypothetical hypothesis of yours really is on the mark, then your life would be in danger, after all. So that you do not get infected, I

[129] お冠 *o-kanmuri* "bad mood". The word 冠 *kanmuri* can mean "crown", like the ones worn by royalty.

shall have no choice but to take preventive measures. Goodness, against my master or against diseases, I simply cannot win."[130]

So she was trying to act cool, this late in the game.

But if she was saying that, then Shinobu herself, the ultimate destination of this contagious disease, was in far more danger—no matter how much she wanted to show off or respect the wishes of her sworn friend, as her partner, I couldn't allow it.

If Shinobu wasn't going to do it, then I would have to.

"There is no way, my master. That I would let you do something like that. She is my sworn friend!"

"Shinobu-nee-san. Don't forget about me, too,"

said Ononoki-chan, who was also present at the treatment ward. If Shinobu was like a masked plague doctor, then right now, this tween girl's position was that of an operating room nurse.

An impressive multitasker, once again about to snatch away the title of Best Supporting Actress.

"If the aim of the disease is to make multiple layovers on its way to a specific target, then who knows when I'll be included in that itinerary, even when I'm not a vampire."

As an artificial oddity, Ononoki-chan was a unique existence not part of a race spread across the world, so that was probably not something to worry about. But considering that my logical reasoning of "the contagious disease's layovers" had its roots in her "Unlimited Rulebook", it was true we couldn't completely rule out that risk.

"I could not care less about you."

"How awful. Even though I already consider you, Shinobu-nee-san, to be a sworn friend."

"I shall kill you until you die."

"That means I'd die, though."

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[130] 主と病には勝たれず *shu to yamai ni wa katarezu*. Not entirely idiomatic as it basically means what it says—people must submit to the unreasonable demands of their masters and diseases.

That artless, loveless banter was completely ignored by Kagenui-san, who pulled away the curtain without care, without even so much as a knock.

As though it were a refreshing morning.

Perhaps it really was.

I'd been assuming the one that would be even harder to convince was the one actually receiving the treatment, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster herself—for that true ancestor who'd so clearly declared that she needed no help, even in that hoarse voice of hers, how would we get her to sign the consent form?

She did technically say, "I would've gone with that, too, if I could," but it wasn't as though those frivolous words were actually committing to the idea.

Before that, how was I going to explain that the cause of the disease was the memorial service held for the thrall under her supervision, Tropicalesque—no matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't figure out a way.

I had no choice but to leave the convincing to her sworn friend.

Though I'd pathetically thought that I had to shoulder everything as the proposer of the idea, in the end, I ended up having to foist that role onto Shinobu.

Fortunately, was not a word I could say here.

Because, on the other side of the curtain, Suicidemaster, sleeping together with the break of dawn, was no longer just on the verge of death.

The death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire.

Was in a near-death state.

To the point that she wouldn't have been able to respond, whether we'd knocked, spoken to her, or even shaken her body—Suicidemaster's body was being drained away.

If we really did shake her body, it might have crumpled to dust.

There was not a trace of how she'd looked when I'd faced her last spring—there might not be nirvana for vampires, but that mummy resembled one of those Buddhist living mummies.

It was crazy to me that she was still alive in this state, but her remaining lifespan was a matter of hours—or maybe only a matter of minutes... It would not be unusual if she were to lose her life in a matter of seconds.

Perhaps she had already ceased to breathe on her own...

"Shinobu."

"I understand. You cannot show me such a sight and expect me to leave her be."

Stepping beneath Kagenui-san's arm that was holding back the curtain, Shinobu huffily marched towards the throne that acted as a sickbed.

Though she had been acting pretentiously, it was likely true she knew that it was absurd to be unwilling at this stage.

There were no tough and cool developments that occurred, the ones that Shinobu, or perhaps Suicidemaster, were fond of.

"Even before the disease, I suppose I was infected by your softness, first. Dear me. If Deathy does survive this, I am sure she will completely cut me off after this."

Even as she complained, Shinobu did not stall as she moved to sit astride Suicidemaster's mummy on the throne—and, into the neck of her sworn friend, who now looked less like a withered tree and more like just a branch, she sank her teeth without a moment's hesitation.

As she had done with me.

Or with Shishirui Seishirou—she mercilessly thrust her fangs in.

For a vampire, there was no form of contact that could be closer.

Feeling like I couldn't bear to watch, I flusteredly averted my eyes—I didn't want to think of this reaction as jealousy, though I had been the one to suggest this in the first place.

It surely wasn't anything like the feelings of Senjougahara Hitagi when she suggested that I go on a date with Kanbaru Suruga.

But, I'd recalled something she'd said, back when Shinobu hadn't yet been Shinobu—that it was a breach of etiquette to stare when a lady is eating.

"Is there even any blood left to suck? In Suicidemaster's veins,"

said Ononoki-chan, coming closer to me.

Had she finally stopped trying to keep me at a distance?

Or perhaps she'd felt some awkwardness in her own way.

"Watching like this, it feels less like bloodsucking and more like bloodletting. But I hope your overly-optimistic plan goes well, *oni* onii-chan. Or *oni*i-chan for short. Your flimsy, overly-optimistic plan."

"Well, me being flimsy is the same as always. As well as being even less significant than a virus. So, as always, I figured it was something worth trying, even if it ends in failure."

"Is it fine to say something like that? Onee-chan is on standby over there so that she can immediately wipe out those two demons if it ends in failure."

Really?

Well, it was a natural position to take for a specialist—we could not simply have her turn a blind eye. If this treatment, or this clinical trial, were to fail or turn for the worse, then it could mean the return of Shinobu as the King of Oddities.

And it could mean even her sworn friend could regain her old power as well.

Though it was possible that the battle-crazy Kagenui-san agreed to try my plan because she wanted that to happen—however, if I had read things correctly, this clinical trial would have the exact opposite result as what that violent *onmyouji* desired.

"*Oni* onii-chan, has there ever been a time where you read things correctly? Aren't you always misreading things? You seem like you'd misread the word 'misread', too. Like, 'mis-re-add'."[131]

"As if I'd do that!"

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[131] 誤読 *godoku* "misread". Yotsugi suggests that Koyomi might say it as *ayama-yomi*, which are alternative readings for the *kanji* (but incorrect in this case).

But, just as she'd said, it was rarer for my readings to be correct—despite how many times Hitagi had told me, "Don't misunderstand," I was still piling up misunderstandings, day after day.

As I piled up my sins.

However, it wasn't necessary for my hypothesis to be completely correct—if anything, it didn't even matter if almost a hundred percent of what I'd spoken with Kagenui-san about turned out to be a misunderstanding.

Because the anti-vampire virus.

Did not affect humans.

If there was one unmistakable fact that the specialists could agree on, then it may as well be this one—because the crux of my proposed diet therapy was to make Shinobu suck out Suicidemaster's blood up to its limit, degrading her from being a magnificent true ancestor to being a mere human.

Just as I'd done to the King of Oddities.

Just as I'd made that young girl into a young girl.

"...Excuses aren't going to work here. I can't pin the blame on Oshino for this. It was entirely my idea. And I haven't even fully thought through what the results could be—"

However, just like how the strained-out leftovers of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, after having her blood sucked by me, had no risk of being infected—though she'd taken on some unnecessary risk by growing to a thirteen-year-old form—if Shinobu completely sucked away all of Suicidemaster's vampiric skills, Suicidemaster would no longer be a vampire and instead be something close to human. And the anti-vampire virus that lay dormant in her body for six hundred years would not take effect.

A host that was "human" would not be attacked.

"But wouldn't what's left of Tropicalesque migrate into Shinobu-nee-san's body? In that case, Shino-nee may as well be drinking pure poison."

"For that, I've already explained it to Kagenui-san."

“And I’m telling you now to explain it to me, too. Want me to bite you for no reason?”

“Scary… But all she needs to suck out is the component of the curse that was cast upon ‘Princess Beauty’. While leaving Tropicalesque’s genes behind.”

After all, if she sucked out everything, her sworn friend would die.

If anything should be left, it would be her devoted butler—if only the curse that had been filtered through Tropicalesque’s direction were to be sucked out, then, well, that had originally been Shinobu’s, anyway.

Just like six hundred years ago, when she had still been “Princess Beauty”, the curse would not affect herself—of course, it would not affect others, either.

As if it could.

The sight of Shinobu crudely slurping away at her sworn friend’s blood, which probably didn’t even amount to a few drops even if you reached into the tiniest capillaries—what about that was beautiful?

"……”

My anxieties increased all the more.

I’d called this love, but this was really a passionate camaraderie.

It was neither charity nor goodwill.

Though it was hard to watch directly, I couldn’t keep myself from stealing glances at the site of her meal—when I’d sucked the blood of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, could I have done so with such passion, with such enthusiasm?

…Maybe this really was jealousy.

Perhaps I’d been possessive, with a desire to hold control over her, as the only person capable of rehydrating that golden-haired young girl… This was forcing me to confront my own ugliness.

“Pwah.”

While I was having trouble deciding if I was uncomfortable staying here or if the curse of “Princess Beauty” was making it hard for me to be still, Shinobu finished her meal—it had felt like a long time, but she had

probably only licked up the few drops of blood that remained within the mummy.

"'Twas delicious. Now, who knows if what shows up will be a demon or a snake[132]—though 'twould be a problem if a demon shows up. It had better be a human. Ka ka."

Perhaps she was feeling refreshed after finishing her meal, or perhaps her own "curse" having returned to her body after six hundred years gave her an effect similar to blood doping, but Shinobu's face displayed an oddly happy expression as she descended from Suicidemaster, who did not appear any different at a glance.

"Did it go a'ight? Former Heartunderblade. Or, Princess Acerola?"

"Hm?"

Maybe because Kagenui-san's dialect had been particularly pronounced with that question, Shinobu seemed momentarily puzzled—or, maybe it was because she'd been so abruptly reminded of the times when she'd been the princess of a now-ruined country.

"Who knows? I shall leave you specialists to make that judgment. All I did was get a taste—like a poison taster, I suppose."

As she spoke, she came back down to us.

Unlike the huffy way with which she had marched up, she had daintily pinched the hem of her cloak to gracefully descend the stairs. She might not have realized that she was acting that way, but her conduct was much like the steps of a princess.

"But, just one thing. There was just one thing wrong with your deduction, my master."

"What?"

There was no way I only got one thing wrong, right?

That was what I'd started to think, but Shinobu continued with a nonchalant expression—though I should say, it wasn't like she hadn't eaten at all.[133]

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[132] 鬼が出るか蛇が出るか *oni ga deru ka hebi ga deru ka*, literal translation as given. Figuratively means "Who knows what terrifying thing might happen".

[133] 何食わぬ顔 *nani-kuwanu kao* "nonchalant expression". Literally means "the face of someone who hasn't eaten".

"You had said that the anti-vampire virus, with the curse at its center, had mutated with the goal of killing me, but that was not the case."

"Eh? If that was wrong, then that's basically saying everything was wrong—"

"Truly, they had fused together quite murkily, and they had mixed together quite chaotically. I was unable to completely separate out the Tropicalesque component—'tis like having removed the peppers from Chinese pepper steak, but the bitter taste is still there."

So, his intentions ended up being more or less conveyed to me—said Shinobu, licking her lips coquettishly.

"His motive had not been to kill me."

"Well then, why the hell'd he put on such a global act? In the end, was it just destructive impulses, and he was just ventin' his anger at all the other vampires?"

"That would just be describing you, no? They were far from destructive impulses—'twas correct to say that he regretted being unable to kill me six hundred years ago, but his ultimate objective was not to kill me. It might be odd for me to speak in defense of him—but primarily, he was trying to keep me and Deathy apart."

Jealousy—love.

Though unintended, I could understand those feelings now.

"In other words, he was lamenting the fact that his mistake—his suicide—ultimately led to Deathy and I forging an even stronger bond. To the extent that, after his death—he could not fully die. And, six hundred years later, when he once again encountered me, whom he had failed to kill, still alive, his regret skyrocketed to the extremes."

He must have thought something like this.

This girl.

I cannot accept her as my master's thrall—

"...I was not exactly her thrall, but technically speaking, that is nothing more than an understanding between me and Deathy. 'Twas much like being unable to accept his new 'little sister'."

Not only was it a common example, it was a familiar one.[134]

I had once been in Shinobu's position.

With Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's first thrall, Shishirui Seishirou, I had been on unbearably bad terms—we were fundamentally incompatible.

"Not to nitpick, Shinobu, but in the end, wasn't he trying to kill you, after all? In order to kill you—"

"He was not trying to kill me, but turn me back from vampire to human. Just as I had tried to do to you two years ago—and just as I have done now with Deathy."

From vampire to human. Turning a vampire into a human.

When she said that, I suddenly understood.

It had been a hole I'd been unable to fill until the very end, but the remaining mystery of why Tropicalesque's contagious disease turned the infected vampires into mummies was not due to a failure or a mistake—so why did the vampires' corpses remain, instead of being reduced to ashes, bursting into flames, or returning to the earth?

I'd come up with perfunctory ideas like, it was to leave the remains to continue spreading the virus, or it was to keep them as preserved foods, but that wasn't it, it wasn't it at all—if anything, my original instincts had been closer to the answer.

The mummies of the high school girls.

The ultimate dried-out forms of the ones who'd failed to become vampires.

It was true that they were different enough to consider them completely different things when comparing them visually, but if they were that different, why hadn't I been able to consider the opposite?

In the opposite direction, they were.

Mummies of vampires that had failed to become humans—that was the direction that the evolution had failed in.

If anything, it was like the evolution had become a lost child.

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[134] 卑近 *hikin* "common" shares *kanji* with 身近 *michiga* "familiar".

Therefore, if the anti-vampire virus were to be given an official name—

"The Human Disease,"

I said.

"Tropicalesque wanted to turn you back into being human... So that was that butler's final objective at the end of all those layovers."

"Indeed. In order to tear apart me and Deathy once and for all."

Tear apart?

That didn't seem right.

I probably wasn't going to be very convincing when I'd already been wrong on such a massive, crucial point, but if that was true, he may as well have just tried to kill her—considering the atrocious properties of the original "witch's curse", that would have been simpler.

However, if the evolution was directed to turn Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—or the shadow of her, Oshino Shinobu—back to human, then it could be because Tropicalesque himself had been a thrall who was a human that had turned into a vampire.

He couldn't recognize her as a fellow thrall—as a "little sister".

But perhaps, as a "person".

"But, in the end, even that failed. The infected vampires all became mummies, with not even their shadows remaining. In terms of their vampiric natures, it's like their shadows and forms did remain. It didn't go well at all."

Ononoki-chan spoke bluntly, without masking her intentions or any shadows or forms.

In actuality, the coffins did have something to contain, and thus the "Corpse Castle" had been filled to the brim with them.[135]

"Ain't necessarily the case that they all failed. It could be that we only discovered the failed mummies—if there's a proportion of the

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[135] 身も蓋もない *mi mo futa mo nai* "point-blank, unreserved". Literally, it means something like "the container has no lid". Koyomi then follows up with how the coffins did have lids (and contents within them).

infected that became humans as intended, then they would have mixed into the population of 7.7 billion, and there'd be no way to find them."

"And Deathy will now be one of them, I suppose—regardless, 'twas indeed a fearsome virus, to try and lead vampires to their extinction."

Shinobu had referred to it in the past tense.

It felt a bit hasty of her, but she had completely cut off the origin of the curse in the end. And now that the origin itself was completely clear, it was possible to come up with measures to contain it—there could even be the possibility that, like how the high school girl mummies could be reverted to high school girls, the mummified vampires in the morgue could be resuscitated into their original forms.

Even if they were dead, they were still immortal monsters.

Of course, my hopes might be too high, and that might be nothing more than a pipe dream, and whether or not the specialists would do that in the first place was beyond my power... But at the very least, there was no doubt that the pandemic of the anti-vampire virus was showing its first signs of being concluded.

The ghost, when viewed closely, is just withered silver grass.[136]

Flowers before a grave.

Even this unidentified disease of unknown origin, after all this, might end up as nothing more than a research subject—and.

"Mm—mmm."

As Shinobu came down the stairs with a relaxed pace, a groan could be heard from behind her. From the throne sickbed.

"Deathy?"

At the sound of her sworn friend's voice, Shinobu turned her head.

I thought that she'd regained consciousness rather quickly after receiving Shinobu's diet therapy, as would be expected of a true ancestor vampire that had lived for a thousand years, but her groan continued into a, "Mmnyah mmnyah.... Zzz..."[137]

Well, of course.

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[136] 幽霊の正体見たり枯尾花 *yuurei no shoutai mitari kareobana*. Literal translation as given. Figuratively means "Things are not as scary as they seem".

[137] むにゃむにゃ *munya munya* is Japanese onomatopoeia for sleep talk.

She was a true ancestor vampire no longer.

Now, more than Oshino Shinobu, and more than Araragi Koyomi, she was closer to human—as though the arrogant and pompous, tough and cool demeanor of the old days were just lies, in a pure voice like that of a newborn baby, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster murmured.

"I can't eat anymore... Tropicalesque."

With her head still turned towards the throne, Shinobu made a face as though she'd swallowed something that was more than just bitter—not that I could see from where I was standing, but I could declare with the utmost confidence that she was making that sort of face.

A face that was not beautiful at all.

"Her sleep-talking is as sweet as dessert, I suppose—yes, yes, 'twas delicious."

It had been a quarrel between siblings in which no one would dare get involved, but it was like a hell that swallowed up the whole world, or a demon world that swallowed up an entire race—and now, this was its conclusion, which could not be told to anyone.

019

The epilogue.

But it was not a few days later, but a few years later.[138]

Since then, it had been two years, or rather, almost three years—compared to six hundred, that number was the size of a virus in comparison, but the current day was the day of Manase National University's graduation ceremony.

However, the graduation ceremony was held remotely.

The only ones who were allowed to actually attend were the carefully-selected honors students from various departments, so, as a poor student who had only scraped by with the unbelievable fortune of not having to repeat a year, I could only attend from the apartment that was my lodgings. Incidentally, my girlfriend, Senjougahara Hitagi, was there in person to deliver the graduation speech. I was so proud of her. Though it wasn't clear if she felt similarly proud of me.

Well, in any case, remote technology had made great strides, so instead of simply attending via the front camera of my computer or smartphone, I was using VR equipment that had been developed recently. I would be able to receive Hitagi's words with the feeling of actually being there—I would even be able to receive my diploma, by wearing a glove-like controller. Seeing as I'd skipped out on my high school graduation ceremony, I wouldn't be able to keep myself from feeling exhilarated at the thought of receiving my first diploma since middle school, even if it was virtual.

Of course, there was no delay in the communication between the graduating students, either... In the end, my project to make a hundred friends had cruelly fallen apart, but I had forged a friendship that would last for a lifetime in Hamukai Meniko, and that friendship was worth a hundred friends. While the graduation ceremony had no audience, as long as they could prepare their own VR equipment, there was no limit to

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[138] 後日談 *gojitsudan*, translated as "epilogue", literally means "the story of a few days later".

how many guests could attend. My parents had promised to attend from their workplace. It was a very understanding workplace—as long as they didn't end up at a murder scene.

With steady progress, the times continued to evolve.

As though that evolution held a direction.

Furthermore, over the past two years, while the situation that had encompassed the entire world had gone back and forth between good and bad, things had slowly but surely gotten better. Most of the population of Japan had gotten vaccinated, and the strain on health care had lightened up. The economy was showing signs of recovery, and unemployment and suicide rates were lower than before—as for me, let's just say that my place of employment had been decided.

The Olympics and Paralympics, which had been the subject of much controversy, had ended with resounding success, and the Koshien, which was to be held this month with much fanfare, would surely be met with great fervor—Naoetsu High's girls' basketball team, with much assistance from the OGs, would surely show good results at the Inter-High School Basketball Tournament. Speaking of which, starting next month, apparently they're completely resuming face-to-face lessons at Kanbaru's university?

Restaurants and recreational facilities could now choose their hours of operation at their own discretion, and concerts and theaters could now openly announce their attendance figures. On TV shows, the partitions placed between entertainers were made more transparent or removed entirely—the fact that "This program was filmed while taking disease prevention measures into consideration" always appeared at the beginning had become just a fun little quirk.

Though it wasn't exactly peacetime, we were able to leave the house without any restrictions on time, so that god of walks, whom I wanted to hug to my heart's content, could now display her full power... I was sure the Kitashirahebi Shrine would manage to reclaim its usual prosperity. Naturally, there were still harsh restrictions on overseas travel, but as long as you took the proper precautions that had become

commonplace, it was possible to go sightseeing anywhere at any time—the era of masks and toilet paper being sold out was now just a story to laugh at. Ah, but face guards had become a bit of a fashion item for the trend-conscious, so they were always in short supply.

The local governments had slowed down their announcements of confirmed cases, first to once a week, then to once a month, and only after careful analysis of the data. And the number of news programs that reported on the data had vastly diminished—yesterday the birth of a baby panda in the Wakayama prefecture had been the headliner.

The practice of regularly checking one's temperature had raised people's health awareness, and as a result, on top of bringing the novel coronavirus into control, humanity had also brought the influenza, hay fever, and the norovirus into control as a sort of side effect or byproduct. Words like "suspended", "postponed", or "reduced in scale" had completely vanished from the newspapers, and the "Three Closes" had started to get a stronger impression of referring to a threefold closed room, and it finally felt like the world was starting to restrain themselves from using the word "self-restraint"—I had managed to reconcile with Oikura, and after the remote graduation ceremony ended, we were going to go to a photo studio together. The *furisode* I picked out would surely look good on her. I even made amends with Sengoku, who had achieved her dreams in Tokyo. The disparities and divisions in the world had disappeared, and Hanekawa, having returned to Japan safely after finishing her duties, was now living with me in my apartment. She'd been up late last night, so maybe she wouldn't wake up until the afternoon?

That was the world of two years later.

Let's just say that's how it was.

"My master,"

said a voice.

As I changed out of my pajamas into the crested *hakama* that my parents bought for me, a golden-haired young girl appeared from my

shadow—since bright lights had been set up for the remote graduation ceremony, my shadow was strongly pronounced.

The golden-haired young girl.

Of course, not thirteen years old, but an eight-year-old young girl.

The young girl, who was actually six hundred and two years old, had crawled out on her own accord, but it seemed she was hesitating to speak—she had never been shy to directly sink her teeth into a topic, but it felt a lot like she was biting her tongue this time.[139]

Did she want her teeth brushed or something?

"No way. Um, so, how should I put it. On this ceremonious day, where you are about to depart for the next chapter in your life, I was not sure if it was such a good idea to tell you this—"

"What is it? If you're okay with me, I'll hear you out, all right?"

"Deathy has died."

As though she'd made up her mind, Shinobu said so decisively.

Fixing her awkward demeanor, she looked straight at me—but, died? Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster—er, the former Suicidemaster did?

"Yes. She had gotten infected with the novel coronavirus. Her condition suddenly took a turn for the worse during her quarantine, and it didn't take long after that."

I'd already heard from Kagenui-san that she was in quarantine.

I also knew that the pandemic was more severe than Japan in many parts of Europe—but still, I was bewildered at this sudden news.

"Eh... Really?"

"Yes. Just a moment ago, I got a hunch. A moment of inspiration. Perhaps I could even say that I had a dream at dawn—the fact that there had not been any time for her to suffer is a small comfort. Though Deathy was closer to human than you or me, now that this precedent exists, we had better not lower our guards. For this disease, either."

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[139] 歯に衣着せぬ *ha ni kinu kisenu* "outspoken; forthright", literally meaning "without putting clothes on your teeth". 奥歯にものが挟まった *okuba ni mono ga hasamatta* "beating around the bush", literally meaning "something got stuck in your molars". Both teeth-related phrases, hence the follow-up.

"....."

I'd been at a loss for words, but I couldn't just keep quiet. I had to accept the reality of the situation.

"...If I hadn't told you to suck the blood of the former Suicidemaster, then she wouldn't have died from the novel coronavirus, right?"

If she hadn't been human.

If she had still been a vampire, she wouldn't have gotten infected by the novel coronavirus, and she wouldn't have exhibited any symptoms—at Suicidemaster's age, I should've known how high of a risk it was if I'd only thought about it, so it was like I'd killed Shinobu's one-and-only sworn friend myself.

"Now, now, 'tis because I knew you would think like that that I was hesitating to tell you. Of course, even if I did not tell you, you would start trouble with me over the fact that I did not tell you. Well, rather than start trouble, 'twould be more like getting yourself into trouble. You idiot. If you had not made me turn Deathy into a human, we would not have had these final two years in the first place."

Shinobu spoke as though she found my attitude to be thoroughly irritating.

Even her disgust was leaking out.

"It had all been done remotely through the screen, but these two years were only made possible because it was remote, and it was quite enjoyable to keep up this cultural exchange with my sworn friend. She had been grumbling about this and that all the time, but I am sure Deathy also found some enjoyment in it, for the remainder of her life."

That spring break, when you kept me alive when all I wanted was to die... I think I finally understand those feelings of yours—said Shinobu.

"Thank you. For saying it that way."

"I am the one who should be thanking you. On behalf of Deathy, and on behalf of Tropicalesque, too."

It was somewhat atypical, and even though it was on the other side of the world, it was the first time someone close to me had died of the

novel coronavirus, so I couldn't hide my anguish—it was like how, even though I knew how ferocious bears could be, as long as no one I knew had been killed by one, I could still imagine them as fluffy and cute. Or like how, even though people knew that vampires sucked the blood of humans, as long as no one they knew had been sucked by one, they would not understand how terrifying vampires could be.

Now, after several years had passed since the beginning of the pandemic, I had finally come to understand true fear towards this disease—but, thanks to Shinobu's words that may have just been mere consolation, I did feel a bit reassured.

However, it did not keep me from the awareness that I'd committed a grave sin.

During that hellish spring break, I had so fervently wanted to die as a human, but for Suicidemaster and Kissshot, I did not allow them to die as demons.

Once again, that truth had been thrust upon me.

"About the funeral... How are things going right now? Over there in Europe."

"Well, traveling there or attending will be difficult. But there is no need to worry. I will not be going there to consume the remains or anything. I have performed my memorial service two years ago, you see."

All I shall do from here is send my prayers.

For my sworn friend, who has finally managed to die, to rest in peace.

"For Deathy, too, this day of her death is a day of departure. 'Tis not returning home, but leaving home. For her, who did not end up killing herself but instead lived out her splendid life, I shall not say 'Goodbye', but 'See you later'. Almost like that Hawaiian-shirt brat... Or perhaps, like a butler. Ka ka."

In that case, you'd be a maid.

But after murmuring that, as though she were mourning, grieving, and hurting, Shinobu once again went to lie dormant in my shadow—I

was a bit afraid that she might shut herself in there for over six hundred years, but surely that wouldn't end up being the case.

She had already made it six hundred and two years by overcoming all of that.

Just as humanity had overcome all sorts of infectious diseases.

And just as they would continue to do so.

"Thank you."

Again, I said my thanks.

This time, it wasn't to Shinobu, but to her sworn friend, the former Suicidemaster—two years ago, I'd felt so awkward that my words of gratitude had not come out properly, but now, I would say it to the end.

Thank you, for allowing me to meet Shinobu.

For being friends with Shinobu.

For not leaving Shinobu to be on her own.

Up until now, and from now on.

For being alive, and letting her live.

And continuing to live on, as something like genes, within Shinobu.

Before the graduation ceremony, it felt like I'd been soaked up to my shoulders in the feeling that I'd graduated from something else entirely—as I thought about going to meet Gaen-san as promised, all the while flawlessly upholding the infection control measures.

It was time for a cultural exchange.

This was—a tale of death.

A tale of death that was covered by blood, stained with blood, cleansed by blood, fought with blood against blood, and linked by blood.

A tale about licking each other's blood, as though licking each other's wounds.

Our precious death tale.

The act of barbarity of traveling to a foreign country with my partner in the midst of a worldwide pandemic was not something I could so overtly speak about at the moment, but perhaps someday, as time passes and a steady peace is recovered—I'll be able to tell it to everyone.

Afterword

Like most people, I used to hold the opinion of, “What use will any of these subjects I study in school have for my future?” but thinking about it now, it’s true that they’ve been quite useful. For example, if it weren’t for literature, I probably wouldn’t be reading books anymore, and if it weren’t for mathematics, perhaps I would have been much more careless with my shopping. However, if someone answered my question in such a way, I would have surely gone, “That’s not what I’m looking for,” with a hazy feeling in my chest. Perhaps rather than wanting to know “What use will they be?” I simply did not want to study at all. Though I wonder what would have happened if someone told me, “You’d be worthless even if you did study”... In actuality, rather than whether or not they’ll be useful, it’s really more about viewing things with the angle of how you can meaningfully apply what you know, so in that sense, studying at school is kind of like training your muscles. Physical education is a clear representative example, because regardless of whether or not you become an athlete, your body will soon start to weaken if you don’t exercise, and your muscles will quickly atrophy... The exercise done by astronauts on spaceships may not have a direct use for their space travel, but that doesn’t mean they can just avoid doing it. Similarly, studying in school is like exercising your brain, or like going for a run every morning. Saying that surely won’t give anyone the motivation to study harder, but in a way, thinking about what use studying might have can also be a form of training that builds the habit of thinking.

As such, I have finally managed to finish writing Araragi-kun’s university chapter. In the first place, when I began the series, I hadn’t even planned for him to take entrance exams, but on that front, none of it had really been planned at all, so I could say it was a very Araragi-kun-like life to have lived. Going forward, I’m sure he will continue to live an unplanned life. Incidentally, at the preview stage, the titles had been “Episode Eight: Deathtopia Destiny”, “Episode Nine:

Deathtopia Destination", and "Final Episode: Deathtopia Death Education", but I have put it all together into "Episode Eight: Shinobu Suicide", so I hope you'll receive it favorably. With the feeling of it being impossible to make use of something if you can't think of how it could be useful, this was a novel written 100 percent to the death as a hobby,[140] the fifth volume of the *Monogatari* series's Monster Season, "Shinomonogatari (1)".

The thirteen-year-old version of Oshino Shinobu was drawn for the front cover. VOFAN-san, thank you very much. In terms of the content, there is almost no link to Volume 1, but please enjoy Volume 2 in which Sengoku Nadeko plays a great role (?), the conclusion of Monster Season, "Final Episode: Nadeko Around".

NISIOISIN

[140] The English word DEATH is used instead of です *desu*, meaning "to be" or "is".

Translator's Afterword

The *Monogatari* series has never been particularly shy about including references to whatever media the author is interested in at the moment or whatever news has happened to catch his eye, but this novel feels unique in that so many references are localized to a specific time and place, that being the COVID-19 pandemic as seen by Japan. It's briefly alluded to in the text itself, but this novel did really feel like modern historical fiction of sorts, an attempt to capture the brief explosion of pandemic-related culture that was once universally known (by the Japanese people, anyway) but is soon to be forgotten. Of course, if there are to be any anthropologists researching changes in culture as a result of the pandemic, it's hard to believe that they'll start with the twenty-seventh novel in a series to source their information.

Generally, a novel's author has an audience in mind, whether consciously or unconsciously, and in the case of this novel, I could imagine that the various references to the pandemic were written for an audience already familiar with those references. It puts me in an interesting position as a translator, as the act of translation involves exposing the story, and the culture embedded within it, to a wider range of people, beyond the audience that was likely intended. I'm not sure if I was ever consciously aware of it, but it really makes me realize that a novel is more than just its plot and characters (though that sounds really obvious when I put it like that). Hopefully I've managed to convey the novel's little slice of the pandemic life accurately. If you were present for the COVID-19 pandemic (assuming you were not stranded on a deserted island somewhere), perhaps you enjoyed comparing with your own experiences and seeing where they differed. Or perhaps they were so utterly the same to the point of being uninteresting, but then again, perhaps the fact that pandemic culture was so similar across different countries is interesting in its own right.

Of course, I'm not trying to claim that I played a particularly large role in translating this novel (though I will admit it was a large amount

of work for me). A novel may begin with its writer, but it can only be truly completed by the reader—you could say the translator is but a layover on its trip to the destination that is you (yes, you!). So, while you're feeling a sense of appreciation for the author for writing this novel (and I wouldn't mind getting some appreciation myself), why not take some time to give thanks to yourself for picking up this novel and reading it?

And, while this should have no bearing on you being thankful to yourself, on behalf of the author, I would like to thank you for reading "Shinomonogatari (1)"—and I would also like to thank you for reading my translation.

Polaris